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THE WORKS OF

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

EDITED BY

SIR HERBERT MAXWELL, BART.

VOLUME IX.

BLACK BUT COMELY

"I've come to see your people"

Frontispiece.

BLACK BUT COMELY

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY H. M. BROCK

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BLACK BUT COMELY

BLACK BUT COMELY

OR

THE ADVENTURES OF JANE LEE

Book I

CHAPTER I

NO SUCH CATCH!

THE day had not yet gone by when murderers were hanged in public. Capital punishment still afforded the multitude opportunity to keep holiday, and combine with the excitement of a tragedy the refreshments and relaxation of a picnic. Therefore a pieman, selling his dainties "all hot," did good business in the crowd round Newgate, and accepted with resignation—even thankfulness—the judicial catastrophe that brought grist to his mill.

Why should he trouble himself about the culprit, a journeyman tailor, who had stabbed his wife in a fit of drunken ferocity, and been convicted on the evidence of his sister-in-law? He could not look along the whitewashed passages of the prison, nor into the bare, blank cell, where the doomed man cowered and shook before that awful Unknown to which he was gliding so smooth and swift and sure, upheld, it may be, for a moment at a time, by the presence of two robust turnkeys, who guarded him, as a timid passenger feels upheld in a storm by companionship with some stout skipper and his mate; yet now and again stung to agony

at the contrast between their situation and his own. Would it have dulled the pieman's enterprise, or the appetites of his customers, to see the grey, drawn face, with the hunted look in its eyes—that most pitiful of all expressions—by which a human soul appeals for help to God and man in vain; to mark the twitching lip, the working fingers, the sinking, dwindled figure, whereon those coarse clothes hung so loose and wide; or to realise in their own minds, what it must be to feel the absolute certainty—from which there is no escape—of being *there* in an hour! fifty minutes! three-quarters! How can the moments run so fast, yet fall distinct, and full, and merciless, each with its stab of mortal fear?

It is a dull, dim morning in October; you might wonder so many inhabitants of the busiest capital in Europe can find time to come into the streets. Nevertheless, as the fatal hour approaches, the crowd thickens fast, so that our pieman finds himself jammed in a corner, whence there is not the faintest glimpse of the gallows, but where he is surrounded by spectators who seem less inclined to stop their mouths with his pies than to enlarge discursively on crime, culprit, sentence, and general bearings of the case. Strange that the softer sex should form a large portion of this assemblage; strange, too, that their sympathies seem rather with murderer than victim, and that the evidence of his sister-in-law should excite general reprobation and ill-will.

"Druv' to it, no doubt," observes a greasy slattern, in a shawl and bonnet literally shining with decay. "That aggerawated and put upon, as he didn't scarce know whether he was dead or alive. Ah! She was one with a tongue, *she* was. As would let you hear of it again—and again—and again!"

"It's my belief as that there sister deserves hanging a precious sight more than he do," replies a neighbour, stout and respectable-looking—a matron, indeed, whose character would be unimpeachable but for drink. "I seen her myself on the trial. 'You're a nice one,' says I, 'with your clean white collar and your black gloves. It would be hard lines,' says I, 'for a man to swing along of a saucy, trapesing minx like *you!*'"

"It's a hanging matter, too, missis," proceeds a bricklayer in fustian, "when you come to knifin' on 'em. And I'm not sure but the law is right."

"Knifin'!" echoes a tall, handsome woman, with the

swarthy skin, soft black eyes, and clear-cut features of real gipsy blood. "I'd have knifed him first, I would! And so would you, my beauty," she continues in a loving whisper to the child sleeping on her bosom, whose dark lashes and small high-bred face denote no stolen offspring of the Gentiles, but a true little Romany of her own. Then, while she stretches her fine figure a-tiptoe, with her graceful head turned towards the unseen gallows, she croons out a sweet-toned lullaby in her own strange tongue for the brown little lady in her arms—the *rinkeni tawni, Romany rawny*, as she calls it, hushing and soothing her darling, lest it should wake before its time.

Even the pieman could not but admire this pair, so uncommon, so picturesque, and so comely withal; sleek and supple as a leopardess and her cub, with something of the wild-beast's watchful restlessness, half suspicious, half defiant, its lithe and easy movements, its sinewy, shapely form.

But soon the crowd began to sway in that resistless ebb and flow against which, as constituting the danger of an undisciplined multitude, wooden barriers had been erected, and other municipal precautions taken in vain. At or near the gallows something of unusual interest seemed to have occurred. A seething wave of humanity, that gathered strength and volume as it rolled in, lifting the pieman off his feet, dashed him with his portable oven to the ground. Its lid flew open, and the dregs of a London mob were soon scrambling for the contents. Such a struggle caused more crowding, more curiosity, more confusion. Women began to scream and faint; strong men, in the instinct of self-preservation, took cruel advantage of their strength, and enhanced by their cowardice the helplessness of the weak. Human beings in a panic are like beasts in a stampede. Those who have once gone down get little chance of coming to the surface again. The pieman, hurled against the gipsy, bore her to the earth. Even as she fell, rose another of those swelling, suffocating surges, that seemed to dash her life out, as a wave dashes a morsel of seaweed against the rock. Blind, pinioned, choking for breath, brain and senses failing in her death-struggle, the brave instinct of maternity conquered all. The beautiful gipsy, with one last despairing effort, flung her child into the woman's arms who, crushed herself, was helplessly crushing her down, and so floated away into the unknown,

with the familiar wail of a waking infant in her ears, and the little face she loved stamped on eyes that were never to brighten with earthly joys, nor fill with earthly tears again.

But the other woman—like a woman—strained every nerve to save the baby. Catching it with the frantic effort of a wild-cat, rather than a seamstress, she passed the precious charge to a neighbour, as she herself failed and succumbed. Again was the child held aloft, when she who had taken it seemed perishing; and so it came about that, changing hands half a score of times, the little gipsy found rest at last in the arms of a thick-set, swarthy, well-dressed man, and was saved. He contrived, by sheer strength, to keep his feet and preserve the infant unhurt, till he gained a lamp-post, and passing his arm round it, steadied himself for fresh efforts when he should have recovered breath. Fortune so far favoured him, that the pressure of the crowd began to take another direction, and, with space to gasp for air, he was able to look at the helpless little mite of humanity thus committed to his charge.

"Well, this is a go!" he muttered, scanning the dark brows and lashes, the pretty waxen features, the tiny well-shaped hands of his new acquisition, with a strong idea of leaving it at once in the nearest workhouse; but the child clasping him round the neck and nestling closer to his breast, with a smile he added, "Dash it, little 'un, you are a beauty; I'll take you home with me, as sure as my name's Jack Lopez!"

CHAPTER II

JACK LOPEZ

HAD it been Abraham, Simeon, Mordecai, Haman even! But why *Jack* Lopez? Jew was written clearly on his rich dark complexion, his blue-black hair, his fleshy aquiline nose, his full-curved lips, and the smooth proportions of his round, well-turned form. His clothes were far too glossy for a Christian's everyday wear, and a certain Oriental taste for magnificence was apparent in the profusion of jewellery that he seemed to carry as a matter of course, even on such an occasion, and that, strange to say, he brought with him untouched out of the scramble. Only a Jew could have preserved the polish of his boots, the lustre of his hat, through the free fight in which he had been engaged; only a Jew would have recovered so speedily the self-possession he lost during the urgency of such bodily peril as he was forced to undergo.

Yes, Jack Lopez was as much a Jew as Josephus; but there was a soft place in his heart, and the little waif he had rescued from destruction crept in to nestle there for evermore. These people have strong affections, though confined to a narrow circle, concentrated on their own kindred, their own families, their own homes. So long as they are mere acquaintances, why should the Jew do more for the Christian than the Christian does for the Jew? But once make Shylock your friend, and he will stick to you closer than a brother, will invite you to his house, welcome you to his family, give you his counsel and confidence, nay, will even lend you money at a reasonable interest, and, believing in your integrity, Christian though you call yourself, will trust you in all honour with his "ducats and his daughter"!

Jack Lopez, a little ashamed of himself, and earnestly hoping that he might not meet an acquaintance, gained the

outskirts of the crowd, leaped into a hansom cab with his charge, who clasped her little hand round his forefinger, and so, not without certain misgivings as to his reception, proceeded rapidly home.

"Why, Jack, you must be mad!"

"As mad as a hatter, I think," replied Jack, showing the boldest front he dared. "It's done, Bell, and there's an end of it; we can't turn the poor little devil into the street!"

He was no fool, and laid the infant in his wife's arms, reflecting that, in all matters connected with babes and sucklings, the sense of touch goes straight to a woman's heart.

Mrs. Lopez, rocking it to and fro as you have seen a young person of six rock her doll, looked over its black head into her husband's face with a comical expression of expectation, suspicion, and surprise.

She was a fair, florid woman, who desired above all things to have children of her own, but, after many years of marriage, had not attained her wish. She fell violently in love with Jack Lopez while yet a boarding-school miss at Putney; married him before she was out of her teens; shared with him the hardships of bad times, bad business, and bad management; nay, sold cigars for him, over a counter, at fourpence apiece; and finally, when certain desperate ventures, and a few judicious advances to minors at sixty per cent., made a rich man of him, worried her Jack considerably with aspirations for promotion in the social sphere—"West End airs," as he called them—a longing for fashionable society, and even vague hints as to the possibility of presentation at Court.

This couple, differing in character as in outward appearance, rubbed on nevertheless comfortably enough. Jack went to business morning after morning from his pleasant house in Tyburnia, and returned, or not, to an excellent dinner, as suited him best; nor did Bell demand any account of his absence. They say that, if you tell a woman such a thing is made by machinery, she asks no further explanation; and, similarly, it seems to me, that wives accept the term "business" as a sufficient excuse for an unlimited furlough, dreading, perhaps, the strain on their faculties that an investigation of all conveyed by that comprehensive word would impose.

So Jack got rounder and sleeker, and fonder of the

good things of life year by year; while Mrs. Lopez grew redder of cheeks, portlier of form, and more hopeless of children day by day. Each thought the other a good deal altered, wondering, perhaps, why they had ever married all those years ago, by no means exulting in their union, yet not exactly wishing they had let it alone. Do you think Mrs. Anderson really admired old John's scanty locks when they were "like the snow," casting never a thought back to the "Joes" with other surnames of her youthful days, and wondering whether or not she had missed the great prize of life? When I see a venerable couple more than usually affectionate, I respect them no less for rectitude of principle than sound common sense. I am persuaded they are making the best of it, and quite right too. Is not substance preferable to shadow; a waking reality to the impossible illusions of a dream?

And yet, while we pass to leeward of a bean-field on a summer's evening, what makes the hardest of us sigh to scent its faint sweet fragrance, that wakes but does not satisfy the senses, recalling certain foolish longings, we ought long ago to have forgotten, for the forbidden, the indefinite, and the unknown?

Jack Lopez and his wife lived habitually in that condition of easy comfort and even luxury which is common amongst Londoners of our time, in the well-to-do middle class; with only a page to wait at dinner, there was champagne on the table every day. Mrs. Lopez, though satisfied to sit in her brougham behind a single horse, felt no hesitation in spending a guinea on a bouquet, and two on a stall at the opera, whenever she had a fancy for music or flowers. Jack could hardly cross the street but in a hansom cab, and spent a younger brother's income on the dinners alone to which he treated himself at Richmond and Greenwich during the summer months. Both went to Dieppe every autumn; and it was only lamentable incapacity for handling a gun, though his eye was accurate enough on a billiard-table, that prevented Mr. Lopez from renting an expensive villa, with five hundred acres of shooting, in Surrey. "Light come, light go," is a true proverb in money matters. When a man can make two or three hundred by his business in a morning, he soon acquires profuse habits of domestic expenditure. His household accounts are lumped in with the losses of trade, his pleasures come out of its profits. Living from hand to

mouth is capital fun, so long as there is plenty in both; and when the rainy day does come, why, after all, like one who has to return a borrowed umbrella, he is in no worse plight than at first.

The speculator who began life without a shilling leaves off perhaps in the same predicament; but he places to the credit of his account with Fortune, the five, ten, even twenty years that he has been spending in luxury, and is not wholly dissatisfied with the result.

"She's a sweet little thing, Jack," said Mrs. Lopez, after the infant had lain in her arms for about half a minute. "There's not many wives, my dear, would take a ready-made baby like this, with such a black little poll, and ask no questions. But there, when I say a thing I mean it; and she might have a worse mummy, mightn't she? and a worse home? Oh Jack, she's opened her eyes, I declare! What a duck it is!"

When her husband returned from business, bringing to dinner a friend the exact counterpart of himself, an extra bottle of champagne was drunk in honour of the new inmate of the household. It afforded an engrossing topic of conversation from the soup (turtle) to the dessert (pines); but when coffee was served, and the men began to smoke, Mrs. Lopez, who had not retired, because after coffee came curaçoa, suddenly remembered a difficulty that, strange to say, occurred to none of them before.

"My gracious me!" she exclaimed, looking hazily round, "I don't suppose the child has ever been christened; and if it has, I don't know its name no more than the dead. There's a J. L., in tiny blue letters, printed on its little arm below the elbow, but that's no clue at all."

"Vaccination," observed Jack sententiously, between the puffs of his cigar.

His wife darted an indignant glance at him, and the friend, who was a person of resource, observed thoughtfully—

"J. L., ah, I see! Why not call it Jael?"

This remark was received with no more favour than its predecessor.

"Nonsense, Mr. Samuel," returned the lady; "might as well call it Sisera!"

The friend smoked and pondered. Perhaps he too was not insensible to certain memories of the bean-field we mentioned even now.

"What should you say to Jane Lee?" he asked. "It's short, simple, and to the purpose."

"Not much to the purpose," answered Mrs. Lopez; "but perhaps it will do as well as another. Jane Lee. It sounds respectable, and it's a good travelling name enough. I'll run upstairs now and see if the darling is asleep!"

CHAPTER III

A BLACK OUZEL

AT five, pretty Jane Lee was the pet of every servant, visitor, and guest in the household, no less than of Jack Lopez and his wife. Sleek, playful, active as a kitten, an indefatigable romp, and a confirmed flirt, the child, to use their own expression, "had a way with it" that neither male nor female could resist. The clear-cut little face sparkled with fun, the large dark eyes shone with intelligence. The gipsy elf learned her letters almost as fast as she looked at them, and caught up the street cries outside with a readiness of imitation that denoted much power of mimicry and a correct ear. Jack Lopez was persuaded that he could provide no better after-dinner amusement for his friends than to stand his adopted daughter on the table, behind the decanters, and bid her go through her performances one by one, from the early milkman to the boy with the evening beer. His guests, men who looked habitually to the main chance, decided that he meant to leave her all he possessed, and Jack, they opined, would "cut up well" when his time came.

At ten, the dark-eyed little maid seemed generally recognised as a chief ornament of the house. Master could not bear her out of his sight, mistress treated her as a child of her own, assuming, indeed, certain honours of maternity on the strength of her treasure, while the servants flattered her beauty, encouraged her whims, and strengthened her evil propensities to the utmost of their power.

Jack, who knew his own affairs well enough, spared no expense to give her a good education. Little Miss Lee might be seen, accompanied by a maid-servant, passing to and from a young ladies' day-school in Bayswater, where she surpassed her class-fellows in quickness and proficiency, no less than in repartee, agility, mischief, and general insubordination. Though rather too slim and angular, she

was still an exceedingly pretty child. Even in London strangers would turn round to admire her large dark eyes, coal-black hair, clear-cut features, lithe willowy shape, straight limbs, and the light tread of those slim supple feet.

A duchess once stopped in Kensington Gardens to ask the maid who she was, and calling her "a handsome little gipsy," while she bent down to bestow a patrician kiss, scarcely guessed how exactly she had hit the mark. To gipsy blood she owed her health, vitality, grace, beauty, and the wild turbulent instincts that made all the troubles of her after-life.

Music and languages she acquired with little effort. In history and geography she slurred her lessons over as well as another. Drawing, no physiognomist, warned by the want of curve in those delicate rectilinear eyebrows, would have wasted time by endeavouring to teach; while dancing, again, seemed as natural to that airy, floating figure as flying to a bird—so that for waltz, gavotte, and cachucha, she never failed to carry off the half-yearly prize. Her ready brain was accurate in arithmetic, her supple fingers seemed no less clever with the needle than the pen; but of all the girl's triumphs over her class-mates, those earned in their singing lessons seemed the easiest and the most complete.

Full and clear in its tone, the young voice had something so wild, sad, and tender in its expression, that listeners of mature age and unexampled austerity, such as the French teacher, a tough Swiss Protestant, or the experienced person who took charge of the linen, were fain to look out at window and wipe away their tears.

Jack Lopez, dreaming over his cigar after dinner, loved to speculate on his adopted child's proficiency in song.

"A good engagement," he reflected, "means a pot of money, particularly when they're handsome into the bargain. Why shouldn't this black little rogue of mine come out as a tip-topper one of these days and take the town by storm? Ah! stranger things have happened. I've had some queerish ups and downs myself. Yes; there's an opening if one can hit it, and I should like to see her with a brougham and pair before I die!"

Then he would walk up and down the room, smoking fiercely and buried in calculation; for with this man pounds, shillings, and pence necessarily entered into every

relation of life. Like Midas, the flavour of all he ate and drank seemed tainted with a smack of gold!

His wife, on the other hand, was little given to speculation, seldom looking forward, indeed, beyond the immediate future, as afforded in the prospect of luncheon and dinner. Fat, contented, and comatose, it needed slight medical knowledge to predict she would be summoned to start for the great journey at inconveniently short notice; and perhaps, with so full a habit, so drooping an eye, and so florid a complexion, she was wise to take no thought for difficulties she might not live to encounter, and troubles that would pass harmlessly overhead, when she was laid in the grave.

So long as pretty Jane's light step was heard dancing on the stairs, her clear voice carolling like a bird in hall and passage, Mrs. Lopez felt satisfied all was well, and left the future, under Jack's supervision, to provide for itself. So year after year stole by, till one bright spring morning, when he had been gone to business about an hour, the maid, taking breakfast to his wife's bedroom, screamed out loud, and dropped her tray with a crash on the floor. Her mistress was as dead as Queen Anne. The doctor, pocketing his lancets, shook his head, and muttered "Apoplexy." Mr. Lopez was sent for from his office, and Jane from her school; the blinds were drawn; the servants spoke in whispers; a funeral with three mourning-coaches paced from the door; and the household went into decent black.

These things are a mere question of time. The memory of Cleopatra may have kept fresh for six months. Mrs. Lopez was forgotten in six weeks, and before the year was out, neighbours began to wonder whether Jack would marry again.

Miss Lee was sitting opposite him after dinner. She took the top of the table now, and now for the first time it struck him how self-possessed she had grown in manner, how womanly in figure and face.

"Jane," said he, "ring for coffee, my dear, and hand me a light. Why, how you grow, child! I never thought you meant to be so tall."

She glanced at her own shapely figure in the mirror and smiled.

"I'm the tallest girl in the school now," she answered, "and the eldest, and, I'm afraid, the wickedest. It's not *my*

fault, Miss Quilter says, but yours, dear. I've been so spoilt at home!"

Jack filled his glass. He was bracing his nerves—"hinging himself up," as he called it—for an effort.

"How old *are* you, my dear?" he asked, with rather a shaky voice. "I'm sure I forget."

"That's not at all a pretty question," she answered, laughing; "and if you forget, I don't see why I should remember; but according to my own reckoning I was nineteen last birthday. I'm sure that's old enough for anything!"

He pondered with his hand on the decanter. The day he brought her home from before Newgate had hitherto been kept as the anniversary of her birth. Could she really be almost twenty? How old he was getting, and how quickly time passed!

"Janey, would you like to go away from here?"

He dreaded some natural burst of regret, even resentment, yet her answer caused him less relief than disappointment.

"Of course I should! I am so fond of change. I should like never to sleep two nights in the same bed."

"I shall miss you," he faltered.

"Oh yes! I am sure of that; you're very fond of me, I know; but can't you be just as fond of me when I'm away?"

A shadow as of pain crossed his face, while he emptied his glass at a gulp.

"I daresay I shall not forget you," he continued. "Well, Janey, we can't all do as we like in this world—that's to say, unless we're enormously rich. My dear, I have made up my mind to send you into the country for a whole year."

"The country! what country?" she asked, looking rather disconcerted. "Suppose I don't like it when I get there?"

"If you don't like it, dear, you need only say so. I've done my duty by you as if you had been my own. If you're not happy in the country, I'll have you back in town. But, Janey, this is a world of uncertainty, particularly in the present state of the money-market. Don't you lose a chance, my girl, if it comes in your way. I'm a good life enough, I hope, but you must remember there's nobody to look after you when I'm gone!"

By this it may be guessed that Jack Lopez, like many other people, intrusted those dependent on him to the care of Providence, with a reliance that, applied to his own case, would have been beyond all praise.

Jane Lee, brushing her long black hair before the glass on her dressing-table, took these things seriously to heart.

"I'm not *his* child, I know," she reflected, smiling at the swarthy beauty opposite, whose white teeth gleamed, and black eyes sparkled, as she smiled back in return. "How surprised I was the first time he told me! I wonder whose child I am! I wonder whether I take after papa or mamma! I wonder if I shall like these people I'm going to next week! What's the use of wondering? There's no end to it. I'm not to throw a chance away, he said. Does he mean I'm to marry the first man that asks me? Girls always marry before they're twenty, I suppose, and I'm past nineteen now. I don't know that I should mind it so much; but he *must* be handsome, and he *must* let me do as I like!"

Now Jack Lopez had only made up his mind to part with his treasure after much consideration. She had been ailing a little lately, and a clever doctor, who intrusted Jack with his money speculations, had given him an opinion —without a fee—to the effect that she ought to have a good twelve months of country air and quiet, in order to ensure the strength of voice and constitution promised by her fine organisation, if it had fair play.

At twenty her guardian determined she should go to Italy, for the best teaching afforded by the best school of music in the world. Long before she was thirty, he reckoned on her climbing to the very top of the tree.

"With engagements in London, Vienna, and St. Petersburg," thought Jack, "she will be independent of fortune, and my business may go to the devil—as I often think it must — and welcome, so far as *she* is concerned!"

So he answered an advertisement from a clergyman in Somersetshire, and made arrangements for the board and lodging of Miss Lee, as entitled by this contract to share the amusements and advantages of a liberal establishment and an elegant home.

CHAPTER IV

MERVYN STRANGE

WE do not think it necessary to accompany our young lady in her journey on the Great Western Railway, enlivened, as it could not fail to be, by the polite attentions of her fellow-passengers, a good-looking young gentleman who got out at Swindon, and an elderly white-whiskered personage going through to Barnstaple. If she felt a little lonely when Jack, waving his disconsolate farewell from the platform at Paddington, glided out of sight, the change of scene, rapid motion, pleasant country, and civilities of her companions soon cheered her up. When the train stopped at Reading, she would not have gone back if she could. And yet the girl was less unfeeling than impressionable; not hard of heart, only young and thoughtless, exulting in her enfranchisement from the trammels of everyday life, roused by a sense of coming adventure, and conscious of that self-reliant spirit which sustains the most inexperienced of birds, when first they leave their nests to soar unaided on the wing.

Poor Jack, who could not face a mouthful of luncheon, was smoking cigars and drinking sherry sadly enough in his office, while Miss Lee disposed of a packet of sandwiches, two Banbury cakes, and a large cup of coffee at Swindon, with the healthy appetite of nineteen.

These refreshments sustained her quite comfortably till she reached the end of her journey—a small station with one porter, no waiting-room, and time-bills of every line in the kingdom but its own. Here she bade a gracious good-bye to the white-whiskered person, who, hastening home to wife and family, was nevertheless so fascinated by the charms of her appearance and conversation, that he peeped surreptitiously at her luggage to ascertain her name. Then she put her handsome face out of the

window, to the utter bewilderment of the rural station-master, and asked if there was anybody waiting for Miss Lee.

"Miss Lee!" echoed a deep voice; and a pale man, with his hand on the carriage-door, reverentially added, in mournful tones, "I beg your pardon, are you Miss Lee?"

"Yes, I am. You needn't beg my pardon," answered the girl, with a little laugh, as of a mocking spirit held decently in check. "I've two boxes, please, in the guard's van, and a hamper, and a dressing-case in the carriage—you'll find it under the seat—and the basket up there, and the wraps down here, and those books, and some newspapers, and my umbrella, and—I think that's all."

While he hunted up these various effects, nor, strange to say, congratulated himself while so doing that he was still a bachelor, she took a good look at him, and wondered privately whether this could be the clergyman in whose society she was to share "the amusements and advantages of a liberal establishment and an elegant home."

Handsome?—No. Ugly?—Certainly not. Tall, thin, clean-shaved, with pale clear-cut features, and dark close-cropped hair, he looked, and indeed liked to look, the character he professed—something approaching an ideal monk of the Middle Ages, as far removed from the roystering friar of our English ballads as from the proud, ambitious churchman of our English history. Admitting, rather than boasting, that he was a Protestant, he covertly admired the temporal supremacy affected by Rome; and declared openly that, for organisation and discipline, the Jesuits were the most efficient body of servants employed by any religion in the world. He could have borne, perhaps inflicted, martyrdom; would have rejoiced in self-imposed penance, however irksome; exulted in priestly ascendency, however absolute; but could hardly have sat down to such an occupation as tent-making, for instance, labouring with his hands, like an honest citizen, while he showed his fellow-citizens the way to a better world by doing their duty humbly, reverently, and simply in this.

Entangled in a lady's luggage on the platform of a railway station, he felt thoroughly out of place, yet he

seemed to have a liking for the job, and no disinclination to take the orders of his employer.

"Did you come on purpose to meet me?" said she, when boxes, hamper, and etceteras had been collected and placed on a truck. "I expected to see somebody quite different; but I suppose it's all right, and you're Mr. Tregarthen, of Combe-Appleton? How far is it to the rectory?"

He blushed and laughed—a faint blush, a weak, nervous little laugh.

"You're mistaken, Miss Lee. My name is Strange—Mervyn Strange—at your service. I am Mr. Tregarthen's curate. He couldn't meet you himself, so deputed me to receive you at the station, and put you into the carriage. It's not more than five miles. You'll be there in plenty of time for dinner."

"Ain't you coming with me?" asked the girl, and wondered why he seemed so disturbed at the simple question; but though she drove through some of the loveliest scenery in the West of England—and that is no small word — she found herself thinking more of Mervyn Strange's abrupt jerky manner, and thin eager face, than of wood and water, hill and dale, hedges and coppice, variegated meadows, scented blossom-raining orchards, all the summer beauties of the landscape through which she passed.

And the clergyman, walking fast, as was his habit, with long even strides, in the track of her wheels, compared her with the few women of his limited experience, not, we may be sure, to her disadvantage—with his mother, a buxom dame of fifty, his cherry-cheeked sisters, a pretty flirting cousin, and a young person of the middle class, who in his Oxford days had interfered with his fancy, if not his heart. What was the difference between Miss Lee and these estimable people, that ranked her as it were in another order of creation? He could not describe nor analyse it, but felt rather than knew that in comparison with these she seemed as the rose to a cabbage, or such nutritious vegetable; as a wild-bird to the plump, serious, gobbling, domestic fowl!

Was she beautiful? He could scarcely ask himself the question before his senses answered in a glowing affirmative. Beautiful in the most dangerous of all beauty,

to men like him. The beauty of Circe in her teens; of the siren and the mermaid, rather than the angel or the nymph. St. Anthony, perhaps, could have explained the temptation that lurks under such outward comeliness, its subtle nature, its insidious force, and the tenacity with which it fastens on a prey, grappling and dragging the victim down into depths from which there is no hope of rescue, till all has been lost that seemed worth while to save.

This gentleman's education had scarcely qualified him for the part he elected to play in the great drama of life. Sensitive, studious, and retiring, he had left his mother's apron-strings to matriculate at a quiet college in Oxford, without passing through the intermediate ordeal of a public school, which, for a lad without brothers, who had lost his father in childhood, seems an indispensable course of training for the future. His abilities, too, were such as reap the sober rewards of the university rather than command success in the bustling competition of the world. He was no cricketer nor oarsman; ignored boxing-gloves, foils, and dumb-bells; could neither have leapt a hurdle himself, nor ridden a horse over it to save his life. But he was man enough to study ten hours on a stretch; and as for pluck, he had the courage of his opinions, a kind of valour more rare among youths than is generally supposed. Identifying himself with a party, whose aim seemed the reformation of our reformed church back to its original stem, he was conspicuous, even while an undergraduate, for the stiffness of his circular collar, the austerity of his black-silk waistcoat, and the inordinate length of his frockcoat. He affected, indeed, a gravity of deportment that the eight mistook for hypochondriasis, and the eleven for hypocrisy; but the man was in earnest, and proved it; for he lived on a crust, and imbibed knowledge from a lecture, while to the vulgar temptations of wine and women, senseless mirth and unhallowed riot, he was adamant itself. To sum up all, he kept within his allowance, consumed no tobacco, played the pianoforte in his rooms, read hard, thought much, went in for honours, and took a second-class.

But hedge your garden as you will, the south wind steals through, with its insidious whisper and its perfume-laden breath. In "the High" was a music-seller's shop,

behind its counter stood a fair, handsome girl, with loving blue eyes, and soft brown hair, the wisdom of the serpent, and, for aught I know, the innocence of the dove. Blake of Christ Church sustained a shrewd rebuff when he made her a proposal, after his kind; and Brazenose men had a tradition that Fred Milo, called in college "the Infant Hercules," from his strength of body and lamentable weakness of mind, would have married her, but that she simply and persistently refused him every time he asked. Miss Morris had her own ideas, probably, as to the material advantages of matrimony, and was capable enough, as these blue-eyed beauties generally are, of managing her own affairs; but she did take an interest in the pale student who bent his head so respectfully towards her own over the counter, and Mervyn Strange, had he but known it, might have succeeded where the would-be profligate and the simple-minded athlete signally failed.

He bought a great deal of music, nevertheless, and stinted himself in certain necessaries of existence, to balance an outlay he could ill afford. He liked to pass the shop, too, in his daily walks, and to feel his pulse beat faster as he turned the well-known corner, though retiring in sad confusion if she spied him from amongst her wares. His was obviously the faint heart that is said never to win fair lady; but whatever Miss Morris thought she kept to herself, and if she wondered at the bashfulness that contrasted, perhaps favourably, with the daring of more importunate admirers, waited patiently to see what would come of it in course of time, say, by Valentine's Day. This little idyl was, however, prematurely stifled in the sudden departure and subsequent espousals of the damsel, who, summoned to nurse a married sister and family at a distance, all swollen out of knowledge by the mumps, quitted Oxford suddenly, and without leavetaking. That she became the wife of a flourishing pork-butcher in Bicester, nearly as strong as Milo, and far more amusing than Blake, has nothing to do with my story, but explains why Strange took his walks henceforth in a different direction, and the High Street knew this pretty shopwoman no more.

It was only a scratch, but it taught him something. He felt that, like the heroes of antiquity, he too was vulnerable. Even insolent Achilles, he remembered, must

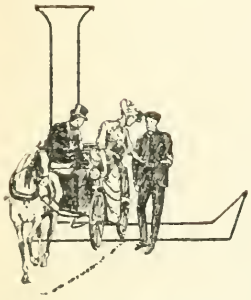
go down if you knew where to hit him. The son of Atreus, as his Horace reminded him, in the midst of triumph was himself defeated by a captive maid, so why should Mervyn Strange of Pembroke escape the fate that overtook Ajax, Agamemnon, and that private gentleman in the Augustan age who, under the name of Xanthias Phoceus, has achieved immortality, as an admirer of the scrubbing-brush and the hearth-broom?

No, he was at least capable of caring for a woman. Then came a thrill of pride and pleasure with the consciousness, none the less keen that he felt the danger of such weakness. A man of his views and temperament, when he took orders, he had thought to rid himself of the softer fancies once for all. God forbid they should assail him even in a dream, for the true priest, in his opinion, should own allegiance to but two superiors, two interests—his Master in heaven, his Order on earth; the cure of souls committed to him by her authority, and the temporal, no less than the spiritual, aggrandisement of his Church.

He could have argued for an hour on the celibacy of the clergy, inferring rather than asserting it was enjoined by the Scriptures; but insisting vehemently on its decency, its expediency, the beautiful example it afforded of self-sacrifice and self-renunciation. A priest, he would declare, is a soldier of the noblest service the mind can conceive. Always in the presence of the enemy, his harness must be stainless, his weapons sharp and ready for immediate use; above all, must he keep himself unimpeded by such heavy baggage as conjugal love, parental anxiety, or the exactions of domestic affection. He must be prepared to march at a moment's notice wherever his duty summons him, acknowledging no other claim, and listening only for the trumpet that calls him into action. Such were this enthusiast's views as to the requirements of his calling, such was his interpretation of the vows he took when ordained; yet could a glance from a pair of black eyes, a sentence spoken in a merry, mocking girlish voice, render him thoroughly uncomfortable and unsettled, harassing his imagination, vexing his conscience, confusing his principles, prejudices, and professions in harsh and hopeless discord, "like sweet bells jangled out of tune."

CHAPTER V

COMBE-APPLETON



"LIKE master, like man," thought Jane Lee, as the primitive country-built fly grated and creaked down a steep hill into the clean little village of Combe-Appleton. "I wonder whether the proverb holds good with rectors and curates. I wonder what a Somersetshire parson's wife is like—I never saw one—I wonder which of us will most astonish the other. It seems as if my wonders would never cease. But here we are. This must be the rectory. What a funny little house! and oh, what a lovely garden!" The driver, a ruddy-faced person, in cotton gloves, with silver lace round his hat, rang a bell under the low-roofed, creeper-grown porch, which was answered by a smiling maid-servant, dropping curtsies with every second word, who ushered the new arrival into a comfortable room, half-study, half-boudoir, that opened on the entrance-hall.

"Missus will be down immediate, and I was to bring the tea in at once," said the maid, and vanished, leaving our young lady at liberty to take a survey of her new home.

There were bookshelves and books in them. Sermons by the Rev. Silas Tregarthen. There was an engraving above the pianoforte—the Rev. Silas Tregarthen in full canonicals. There was a stand with a photograph—again the Rev. Silas Tregarthen.

"He's not the least like Mr. Strange," thought Jane Lee; but just then the door opened to admit a full-blown, comely woman, of a certain age, who walked in with outstretched hands and an assured step, such as became the

mistress of the house, and denoted she could be none other than the wife of the Rev. Silas Tregarthen.

"My dear, I'm so glad to see you. We got your pa's letter—Mr. Lopez, I mean—and we've been expecting you all day. No ceremony, I entreat. Take your bonnet off here, while they're unpacking your box upstairs, and have your tea comfortable. You'll enjoy it after your ride. The rector—that's Mr. Tregarthen, my husband, you know—was so vexed he couldn't go to meet you. He sent his curate instead. I hope you didn't miss each other. Mr. Strange makes such mistakes sometimes. What did you think of him? Here comes the tea; you must be famished, my dear. Won't you like something substantial with it?"

So one poured and talked, the other drank and listened; each lady taking in, with covert glances, the dress, accoutrements, and general calibre, as it were, of her new acquaintance, forming the while a mental estimate, not too flattering, of the *tout ensemble*.

"Fat, vulgar, ignorant, and good-natured," thought the visitor; "older by ten years than she looks, feels, or wants to be thought; dress Bridgewater, manners Putney. Considered to have made a catch when she married the rector, a hundred years ago. Jealous of him, no doubt, to this day. I shall manage her well enough, but she will bore me, I feel. Never mind, I came down here to be bored, and get strong. If it's very tiresome, I'll write home, and Mr. L—— will be only too glad to have me back."

Since she knew he was not her real father, she always called Jack Lopez, Mr. L——, and could turn him round her finger, by that or any other name, with perfect skill and success. Mrs. Tregarthen's conclusions were less decided, her thoughts more perplexed. They ran somewhat in this wise:

"Too dark for my taste, and as bold as brass, in spite of her airs and graces. Yet it's curious how men admire that forward kind of girl. I wonder what Silas will think of her! I wish she hadn't come, but now that she *is* here one must make the best of it. An orphan, too! My heart warms to any orphan. She'd do nicely for Mervyn Strange, if he took a fancy to her. There are many objections, though, to a married curate. And most likely she's looking her best now, with the excitement of the journey, the flush and the hurry, and one thing and another. I daresay she won't be half as handsome to-morrow."

Assuming, perhaps hoping, such might be the case, Mrs. Tregarthen showed her visitor into a pretty little bedroom, with honeysuckles peeping in at the window, and there left her to prepare for dinner, after the following caution :—

"You needn't make yourself very smart, my dear. There's nobody but ourselves, unless young Paravant should drop in, from Combe-Wester. An old pupil of my husband's, he's quite at home here, and as likely as not to come without dressing at all."

Such a contingency, so expressed, seemed startling enough, but it set Jane Lee thinking ; and she certainly bestowed more care on her toilet than seemed absolutely required by the occasion, particularly to meet this unceremonious guest.

In white, relieved by a scarlet ribbon at her breast, a scarlet flower in her bright black hair, even Mrs. Tregarthen, with a mental reservation that she did not admire the style, was forced to admit she had seldom seen so striking a person as Jane Lee. Her husband, a puffy, pompous personage, absurdly like his own picture hanging opposite, was simply staggered, and murmured some unintelligible words of welcome as he took her in to dinner, very different from the rounded sentences he had prepared in his drive home from attending the bishop at a neighbouring rectory. To give him his due, Mr. Tregarthen was a man of overpowering eloquence with a pen in his fingers and a sheet or two of foolscap before him. His best extempore efforts, so surprising to his admirers, had been learnt by heart, with plenty of time to think them over. Nobody was more ready at an impromptu, but, like many orators of wider fame, he could not swim without corks, and was all abroad if the voluminous notes he prepared were forgotten or mislaid.

The party had scarce unfolded their napkins when a shadow passed the window, and a bell was heard to ring at the garden door.

"I told you so," said Mrs. Tregarthen, looking round in triumph, as a young man entered the room unannounced, to take his seat at the table, with the less ceremony that a place had been laid for him, and he seemed to be expected as a matter of course.

"Mr. Paravant, Miss Lee"; the lady half rose, the gentleman made a bow, and their introduction was complete.

While a neat-looking, neat-handed parlour-maid waited on this party of four, dispensing soup and fish, cruets and sauces, with the utmost attention possible, and the least noise, those whom she served were stealing at each other glances of curiosity and interest, not devoid, on Miss Lee's part at least, of amusement and surprise. Mr. Tregarthen could not take his eyes off the attractive young lady who had that day arrived by rail and fly to share his home. Mrs. Tregarthen, watching her husband as a cat watches a mouse, seemed to express in her whole deportment, from the restless hands and eyelids to the quiver of gaudy ribbons that adorned her head-dress, "I should like to catch you at it!" Mr. Paravant was admiring, in a preoccupied, uneasy kind of way, the handsome girl who seemed to have dropped from the clouds into this Somersetshire village for his especial subjugation; while Jane Lee, kneading her bread thoughtfully between her white fingers, speculated as to who he was, what he was, why he seemed thus to come and go unquestioned, and whether he too—with the same privileges as her own—was "to be treated in every respect like one of the family."

Not being shy, our young lady felt unwilling to forego information of any kind, for want of asking. Fixing her dark eyes on him till he fluttered all over, like a cockchafer with a pin through its back, she hazarded the innocent remark that she had passed through a beautiful country on her way from the station, and paused to see how it would be taken up. Young Paravant, in some trepidation, felt himself called on to reply.

"Glad you like it, I'm sure," said he, blushing a little, and tugging at his shirt-cuffs with the *mauvaise honte* that often accompanies a good deal of self-assertion. "Pretty road from the station. I don't know whether you passed Combe-Wester. Depends on which way you came."

"Combe-Wester? Is it a low white house under the hill, with an avenue of chestnuts, and an iron gate in the high-road?"

"Right again! That's Combe-Wester, fair enough. What did you think of it?"

"I thought it looked very quiet, very retired." She was going to add, "very dull," but didn't, and was glad of it the next minute.

"Yes, it's quiet and retired enough. It's a good quarter of a mile, you know, from the road. I hope you'll drive

over and take a look round some day, Miss Lee. I belong there. Combe-Wester's mine."

She stole a glance at him from under her dark eyelashes, that denoted a dawn of interest, but did not betray one-tenth of the surprise she felt. He seemed so unlike the sort of person that Combe-Wester or any other country-place could belong to. Jack Lopez would have called him a yokel; the grown-up young ladies at Miss Quilter's, a cub. He had dressed for dinner, certainly, thereby falsifying the predictions of his hostess, but he wore coloured trousers and a black neckcloth. He was a good-looking young fellow, too, with healthy cheeks, sleek brown hair, and little deep-set eyes, that were grey in one light, green in another, but bright and keen in all. At a market-dinner amongst the farmers, you might have taken him for a subaltern of militia; whereas, at a military mess you would have felt assured he was a civilian, and a youth brought up in the country. Miss Lee's knowledge of mankind, acquired from interchange of opinions with her schoolfellows, was necessarily limited, but she made up her mind, without the slightest hesitation, that if it really belonged to him, the chief merit of young Paravant was to be found in Combe-Wester.

"I daresay you are very fond of it," said she, turning languidly away to receive the attentions of her host, who, doing as he would be done by, pressed on her many rural delicacies with overpowering hospitality, especially recommending a certain West-country dish called junket that met with her entire approval.

As the Rev. Silas warmed under the influence of good cheer, brown sherry, and cider of his own bottling, better than most people's champagne, he grew more and more chatty and affectionate, engrossing the whole attention of his visitor, while utterly ignoring the scornful glances and snorts of indignation launched at him by his wife. Miss Lee was a good listener, and he detailed to her, at considerable length, the responsibilities of his parish, the particulars of his preferment, the peculiarities of the bishop, and shortcomings of sundry parsons, his neighbours, who satisfied their consciences with three services a fortnight, and went hunting twice a week. Then he branched off to his glebe, his Devons, his breed of black Berkshire pigs. He was a practical farmer, you see, and something of a gardener as well, mowed his own lawn, budded his own

roses; he would show Miss Lee how to do the last, and flattered himself he would inoculate her with a taste for country life. Before the dessert was set on, he had already called her "his dear young lady" three several times, and Mrs. Tregarthen could stand it no longer.

"When Silas has *quite* done with you," said she, making with fingerglass and napkin a signal, called by ladies "the move," and so sailed off to the drawing-room without further delay.

Here the conversation turned, naturally enough, on the guest who arrived to dinner so unceremoniously after they sat down. The rector's wife could fight, none better, but she could also manœuvre. Subsequently, upstairs with her husband, she was very likely to give battle, but in the meantime a change of front seemed more advisable than an attack in line; so, smoothing her brows, she addressed her companion with one of those forced smiles that the photograph reproduces to perfection, but no painter has ever succeeded in imitating on canvas.

"And what do you think of him, my dear? Good-looking, isn't he? and pleasant-spoken when he gets over his shyness? Having no children of our own, he's almost like a son to the rector and me. Bless you, he comes and goes here day after day, in and out, just as he pleases; but he's a fine young man, you'll admit."

"Oh, very," answered Miss Lee, whose standard of male beauty, like that of her companions, had been formed on certain gentlemen-privates of Her Majesty's Life Guards, frequenting the suburb of Bayswater, with short red jackets and long blue legs. "He ought to be taller, though, to suit my taste."

"Taller? I don't quite agree with you, my dear. He's as tall as the rector, and I'm sure that's quite tall enough. I never could see what there is to admire in a man like a maypole. And he has a good property, too. A very good property, if he would take care of it. What he wants is a wife to look after him and keep him straight."

"But surely he's very young," objected the other. "You wouldn't have him marry before his whiskers are grown?"

"I don't know anything about whiskers," replied the rector's wife. "Why, if you come to that, look at Mr. Strange. He's thirty, if he's a day, and no more whiskers than the back of my hand. Youth's a drawback, perhaps,

in some things, but after all, people get older every day they live. No, there are many men would make worse husbands than young Paravant."

"Paravant—what an extraordinary name!"

"It sounds foreign, don't it? But it's a good old West-country family for all that. They have been settled here and at Upper Appleton, from father to son, pretty near three hundred years. James Paravant is proud of his pedigree, I can tell you, and his name too. It's French, you know, taken from their motto, 'Par avant!' you understand, 'Always in front.'"

"I see, and it's rather appropriate. I suppose you call the present representative 'Forward James.'"

CHAPTER VI

FORWARD JAMES

THE nickname stuck to him. It was repeated from mouth to mouth till he could not escape hearing it, and notwithstanding some irritation, found himself compelled to accept the title, and answer, without a murmur, to the appellation of "Forward James."

Perhaps the sarcasm seemed less pointed to him than to another. He pleased himself, no doubt, by assuming that it inferred many noble qualities, such as active, daring superiority in field sports and athletic exercises; above all, a headlong gallantry in affairs of the heart, which young men esteem and appreciate in proportion to the awkwardness of their advances and their ignorance of the other sex —who, while justly giving preference to the diligent and painstaking over the laggard in love, are yet sufficiently good judges to recognise the wide difference that exists between haste and speed.

Before Miss Lee had been six weeks at the rectory, Forward James was only too happy that she should call him by any name she pleased.

It was pitiable to see the complete subjection into which this young man had been brought, chiefly, I am bound to say, by a course of treatment that he ought to have rebelled against from the first. Miss Lee rarely spoke to him at all. If she did condescend to notice his presence, it was only to contradict his assertions, sneer at his opinions, turn him generally into ridicule, and impress on him practically the meaning of the word "snub."

Paravant, who, such as it was, had hitherto been the unquestioned cock of his own walk, felt utterly intimidated and disheartened by an adversary so unlike those over whom he was accustomed to obtain his easy triumphs. Equally unable to fight or fly, he seemed positively to court humiliation and defeat. Hitherto he had considered

himself the show man of the parish, owning the largest acreage, occupying the best pew in church, possessing a four-wheeled carriage, a good house and garden, stabling for six horses, cows, bees, out-buildings, and a conservatory. Independent in means, and his own master—for his father slept with the other Paravants in Appleton churchyard, and his mother rented a furnished house in Bath—it was the dream of every farmer's daughter within a radius of three miles, to become the wife of this paragon, thereby taking precedence, as a squire's lady, of sisters, rivals, and former friends.

There are differences in rank of which the Lord Chamberlain has no cognisance. A few hundred acres of your own entitle you to more consideration than the rental of half a county from another; and Forward James, had he seemed a little less forward in manner, might have been received cordially enough amongst the landed gentry as one of themselves; but he preferred to be king of his company, and affected rather the society of those tenant-farmers and tradesmen with whom his word was law. The Rev. Silas had done what he could for his pupil, and strongly advised him to enter the militia or the yeomanry, but James was too well satisfied with his own advantages to risk competition, and, being a bumpkin of the highest calibre, a bumpkin he chose to remain.

Since Miss Lee's arrival he made some excuse to dine almost every day at the rectory, arriving there in such a heat and flurry as even the rector's cider seemed unable to cool or compose. On these occasions, however, he found the young lady's conversation either monopolised by the Rev. Silas, who made no secret of his pleasure in her society, or her interest engrossed by Mervyn Strange, whose silence seemed somehow much more to her taste than his own platitudes. Presently he took to watching for her in the garden, where she spent much of her time reading or working in the open air, and pounced upon her with far-fetched excuses for his appearance, and a transparent affectation of surprise to find her in her usual haunt. All this roused her sense of the ridiculous, and provoked her a good deal at the same time.

"Mrs. Tregarthen at home, Miss Lee?" he would inquire, with an air of the deepest solicitude. "She is quite well, I hope. Passing the house at anyrate, you know, I thought I would call to inquire."

"Quite well, thank you, Mr. Paravant. Wouldn't you like to see her? You'll find her in the drawing-room."

"Oh yes! the drawing-room, of course. Perhaps she's ousy, Miss Lee; perhaps I'd better wait a little outside."

Then Jane would resume her work, taking no more notice of him than of the great blundering bumble-bee groping about among the moss at her feet. After a while he would ask if he might smoke a cigar in her presence, and, receiving permission, would light up with exceeding satisfaction, because this meant an uninterrupted interview with his idol of some thirty minutes at least.

One day, under the influence of tobacco, he became more demonstrative than usual. She had dropped her book, and picking it up, he glanced at the title-page.

"French!" said he, with an air of increased admiration. "Miss Lee, can you speak French?"

"Yes, of course I can; can't you?"

"Not exactly. You see, I haven't been taught. I've never learned lots of things that fellows like Strange know. Tregarthen didn't take much pains with me. I suppose he saw I wasn't exactly a bookworm; but I'm not such a fool as I look, Miss Lee."

"That I can easily believe."

"Ah! now you're laughing at me. I don't mind some people laughing at me; but I wouldn't stand it from everybody. I daresay you think I couldn't cut up rough—no more I could with *you*; but I can take my own part as well as most if I'm put upon, and always could from a boy!"

"Why, you're a boy now."

"I'm not, I'm past one-and-twenty. If a man isn't a man at one-and-twenty what's the good of coming of age, and giving the labourers beer and all the rest of it? Twenty-one and my own master. Don't you think, Miss Lee, it would be a very good thing if I was to marry?"

"For yourself, do you mean, or the lady?"

"For both. I should be very fond of her, I can tell you; indeed, I'm very fond of her now."

"Then I certainly shouldn't advise you to think of it. She would lead you the life of a dog!"

"But why? If I did everything she told me, and—and—liked her better than the whole world?"

"I can't conceive anything more tiresome and ridiculous. But why do you ask *me*, of all people?"

"Because you are nineteen yourself—because you are so clever and so—so different from the people down here. Because, Miss Lee—because"—

"Because you can't get another listener," she laughed. "Now, take my advice, it's meant for your good. Do something. Go out into life. Don't stay blinking here at the daylight, like an owl in a hollow tree, but launch on the stream, and ten years hence, when you feel you are really a man, tell some lady you like her; perhaps she will listen to you then. To-day she would only laugh in your face. Don't be angry. I'm not very old, but I think in such matters I have forgotten more than you ever knew."

He blushed scarlet; tears of rage and mortification rose to his eyes; but he turned his head away and made shift to swallow them down. Jane Lee went on with her work, thoroughly enjoying his discomfiture.

"Shall you stay to luncheon?" she asked, after a pause. "We rather expect Mr. Strange. He hasn't been near us for a long time."

"Does it seem long to you?"

"Yes; the days pass rather slowly in the country, and a little excitement goes a great way."

"Then it *is* excitement to meet Strange at luncheon? Miss Lee, what can you see in that fellow? A pompous prig, I call him, and I sometimes think I shall tell him so."

"Do. He will give you just the sort of set-down you require. I don't know what schoolboys call a prig, but Mr. Strange isn't the least pompous, and, for my part, I think he's very pleasant company."

If you have ever watched a kitten amusing herself with a ball of string, you must have observed that the instincts of the cat are fully developed in its offspring, and that the one has as little mercy on her plaything as the other on her prey. Jane Lee could have shown no more skill, taken no more pleasure, in making her admirer unhappy, had she been a coquette of ten years' experience—nay, for such obvious distress as his, nine-and-twenty might possibly have felt more compassion than nineteen.

He threw his cigar away with a jerk, and rose stiffly to his feet.

"I—I don't think I can stay to luncheon," said he, speaking rather low and thick. "I have just remembered that I had forgotten an engagement for the whole after-

noon. Please make my excuses to Mrs. Tregarthen. Good-morning, Miss Lee."

"Good-morning, Mr. Paravant."

"Good-bye." He put his hand out and looked reproachfully in her face.

"I don't like saying good-bye," she answered, taking the offered hand graciously enough. "It sounds as if I was never to see you again. Ain't you coming to dinner?"

"That depends on *you.* I will if you ask me, of course."

"How can I ask you? It's not my house. If it were, perhaps you'd have a general invitation, only I should expect you to behave a good deal better than to-day. I am quite afraid of you, Mr. Paravant, when you're so cross."

"Afraid! *You* afraid of *me!* Oh, Miss Lee, dear Miss Lee, if you only knew"—

She jumped up, gathering books and needlework in her arms.

"There's the luncheon-bell!" she exclaimed, hurrying into the house; "and here's Mr. Strange. It's too late to keep your appointment now, Mr. Paravant. Better make the best of it, and stay with your friends while you can. Some people never know when they're well off."

CHAPTER VII

TWO STRINGS

POOR James Paravant, in the hands of such a young lady as my heroine, was like a fly in a spider's web. The more he tried to extricate himself the more helplessly he became entangled. Twenty times in the week did he resolve to put an end to this feverish life of longing and uncertainty in a serious proposal, and was only deterred from so desperate a remedy by grievous ignorance as to the form of words usual on such occasions, and an instinctive conviction that he would be refused point-blank!

In the latter contingency it would be incumbent on him, he thought, to carry out the part of a despairing lover by flying his country, or at least removing as far as Bath, there to seek "surcease of sorrow" in the society of an admiring mother, and the mild excitements of provincial dissipation. "She would be sorry," he thought, "when it was too late, and the heart that had worshipped her so fondly was lost to her for ever." But in the meantime he hungered to see her every day—was exceedingly loath to leave Combe-Wester just as his grass was ready to cut—and reflected, not without reason, that one could hardly expect to advance in the good graces of a mistress by calmly resigning her to a rival, and giving up the pursuit in disgust.

Had he a rival? He asked himself the question, very often, to answer it angrily in the affirmative. With the instincts of a lower nature, he mistrusted, no less than he disliked, Mervyn Strange. While professing contempt for a man who could neither ride nor shoot, nor tie flies, nor play cricket, nor, indeed, drink beer and smoke tobacco, he was yet conscious of the other's superiority in moral energy, force of character, and the mental qualities that win success in life. To enter the lists against such an adversary was to

court defeat, and yet how could he bear to abandon the contest? The more he thought the matter over the more he hated Mervyn Strange, the more he felt satisfied his life's happiness depended on the favour of Jane Lee.

In those complications which romantic people call affairs of the heart, there is nothing so pitiable as a reversal of that superiority erroneously supposed to be the prerogative of man in his relations with the other sex. When the lover grovels of his own accord in the dirt, he cannot complain if he is trodden on. Forward James, as we have seen, knew no French. He had never heard, nor could he have translated, the sensible maxim that, in all relations of life, "*Il faut se faire valoir*"; but there was not the same excuse for Mervyn Strange.

Before these two men had been six weeks under the influence of Jane Lee's attractions, each succumbed, in his own way, to the charm that each, in his own way, did his utmost to resist.

Paravant, as was natural, went down without much struggle, but for his senior the process of subjugation was longer, more complicated, not devoid of cruelty and coercion. Some girls, independently of education and opportunity, are born coquettes, and of these an earnest, simple-minded man, especially when imaginative and self-conscious, seems the natural prey. The strongest attachments are those which defy the laws of probability and the fitness of things. When a boy's first love is a woman of forty, she finds herself the object of an infatuation that, despise it though she may, is touching in the absurdity of its self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. When a young lady compels some contemporary of her papa to dance attendance, in chains and tight boots, on her every movement, she enjoys an absolute sovereignty of which she cannot but recognise the absurdity, while conscious that she is neither worthy nor willing to be so adored by such an admirer.

When two people are thrown together, whose paths through life have been shaped for them in opposite directions, for whom straitened means, family quarrels, other entanglements, have made affection a torment, and marriage an impossibility, they will go on caring for each other till they are grey, with a constancy that can only be accounted for on a principle of contradiction inherent in the human race, derived perhaps from our common

mother in her garden of Eden, hankering after forbidden fruit.

Whereas, if Adonis, with ten thousand a year in a ring-fence, marries Hebe with an adjoining ten thousand a year, also in a ring-fence, cheered by the enthusiastic approval of friends, relations, tenants in the marquee, labourers on the lawn, and five columns of the county paper, the chances are they will be yawning in three months, wrangling in six, and starting before the year is out on a journey that, notwithstanding many stoppages, much hesitation, frequent turnings back, and puttings on of the drag-chain, too often terminates in sin, shame, discovery, the Divorce Court, and misery for life.

Mervyn Strange, however,—taking himself to task severely in a solitary walk to visit a parishioner,—had not yet arrived at such reflections as these. Steep and rugged are the heights of Mount Ida after our footsteps have fairly entangled us in the thickets and precipices that defend her shrine; but the start is pleasant enough, rising gradually on an easy incline, covered with grass and flowers. The clergyman began to labour, and stumble, and catch his breath, ere he was aware he had really left the plain. The first time he saw Jane Lee, he said to himself, "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever!" with the sense of admiration, apart from any idea of possession, that we experience in contemplating the macaws in the Zoo, for instance, the Koh-i-noor diamond, or, say, the golden image of Prince Albert, the great and good, in Hyde Park. The second time, on leaving her, he felt it required an effort to shake off the influence of a presence that seemed to hang about him like the memory of a scent or a song. The third, he wondered what she thought of him, and decided that *if* he were not a clergyman, and *if* he had any intentions of marrying, with many similar contingencies, this was in every respect the sort of girl he should like to make his wife.

When a man has got thus far he seldom comes back again a single step. The thorns may be sharp and frequent, the path rugged, overgrown, and full of holes; but, after all, it *is* a garden of roses, even though they hang out of reach.

Self-examination has been much recommended by divines rather than philosophers, as a wholesome discipline for the mind. I am inclined to doubt if its effects are so

remedial as those of constant responsibility and occupation. When the pressure is raised to hard work it takes the nonsense out of us with extraordinary effect; and I am persuaded that no amount of solitary reflection, no thinking a matter over, backwards and forwards, to end where we began, enables us to encounter its difficulties so successfully as the energy we derive from intercourse, collision, even contest, with our fellow-men.

Mervyn Strange had a long walk before him through a pretty country, and not much, necessarily, to take up his attention. The invalid he proposed to visit was deaf as well as bedridden. His sermon against next Sunday was prepared—not written, you understand, because he persisted in preaching extempore, and in doing it remarkably ill. The school-feast, having taken place last week, was off his mind. Appleton revel, with its yearly overflow of drunkenness and disorder, had not yet arrived. The hay-harvest, now at its height of richness and fragrance, affected him neither one way nor the other. He could afford leisure for a pitched battle with his own heart, and the *causa teterrima* was Jane Lee.

His tactics seemed wrong from the beginning. In all contests of love or war, half measures must necessarily be fatal. You may fight, or you may fly; but if you strike it should be as hard as ever you can; if you run away you must break the bridge behind you, and on no account turn back to look after your baggage. In spite of their true hearts and honest natures, I appeal to the Royal Navy whether blue water is not an effectual cure for love.

Green fields, however, particularly in the rich West country at midsummer, have a very different effect. Newmown hay, the song-birds, the fainter note of the cuckoo, sweetbrier overhead and buttercups underfoot, are apt to soften and stultify. The male heart, marble in St. James's, becomes wax in Somersetshire; and the ancients were right in assuming Nature to be a feminine deity, though, unlike women in general, she seems favourably inclined to her own sex.

Mervyn Strange could understand—nobody better—why to-day there was a deeper blue in the sky, and why the wild aromatic odours that breathed from a golden blaze of gorse woke in his heart a thousand tender fancies and desires — vague, indefinite, coming and going, like the breeze over the hay-fields, charged, like that pleasant

air, with such a sweetness as seemed to enthral his senses and intoxicate his brain.

Who shall explain how the droning of a bee, the lowing of a cow, the grating see-saw of a haymaker sharpening his scythe, could recall such a picture as this to the imagination of a hard-worked parish priest? A pale, proud face, with clear-cut features, and lips somewhat too thin, that curved less often in mirth than scorn; a dainty head, carried high, as though accustomed to wear a crown; dark waves of hair, shining, luxuriant, of which to possess one single thread he would have sacrificed a limb; taper hands, with the filbert-finished fingers suggestive of her supple, shapely race; arched and slender feet; a lithe yet swelling form; and eyes, of which the glances that he always sought, yet always shrank from meeting, seemed to thrill him even here in the meadows—a full league off as the crow flies.

"I must not think of her!" he told himself again and again, while he thought of nothing else, as he swung along from stile to stile, and field to field, at the rate of five miles an hour. "If I were weak enough to allow it, this beautiful girl would take entire possession of my faculties, and I should be good for nothing in my calling as a priest. For a layman, I can conceive no greater pride, no greater happiness, than to throw his heart down at her feet, and bid her take it up into her bosom, or crush its life out in the dust, that it might never beat for another again. Oh, what a lot! what a heaven upon earth! to be hers, to serve her, to defend her, to watch her every look and action, to be with her day and night!

"But this is the very thought that I must drive out of my mind at any cost, at any sacrifice. St. George had never been canonised but for the Dragon, and she is *my* Dragon, standing across the path to heaven! Oh that we could meet in close and mortal combat! I would be content to perish at her feet, her breath on my brow, her calm, cruel, maddening eyes looking down into mine. To perish? Ay, but it would be to perish everlastingly! And these poor souls committed to my charge, this score or two of silly sheep intrusted to my keeping, here literally in the wilderness—shall I not be faithful over a few things? Shall I, the shepherd, leave them to the wolf, because of a girl's dark eyes, that look upon me kindly twice or thrice in a week? Oh, my darling! my

darling! how much would I give up for your sake! But no! I dare not. I *will* not! Henceforth I must school and harden myself, till I become a man of steel. You shall be to me as the statue of a goddess in a gallery, or the picture of a nymph on a wall. I will come into your presence without a tremor, leave it without a sigh, and—and because I could love you so dearly, I will worship you and care for you no more!"

Having arrived at this sensible determination, it is not surprising that the curate, after fulfilling his parish duties, should have so timed his walk and directed his steps as to pass his rector's garden at the hour Jane Lee was pretty sure to be sitting there with book or work-basket, under her accustomed tree.

When people have made up their minds to overcome temptation, they are usually indiscreetly eager to put their good resolutions to the test. I doubt if the plan often answers, and am inclined to think that for men, and women too, it is safer, in such cases, to run than to fight. Mervyn Strange, however, was a strong-minded person, priding himself on his force of character, and this was the result.

A great start of surprise, assumed, no doubt, because he must have expected to see her, or why did he pass that way? A rush of blood to his brow, followed by unnatural pallor and white twitching lips. A constrained greeting, that might have convinced the merest schoolgirl of her power, and a little nervous laugh, of which he was painfully conscious and pitifully ashamed. Miss Lee, on the other hand, seemed perfectly cool and collected. It is not to be supposed she was ignorant of the effect she produced, nor do I believe but that a young lady can appreciate the homage she doubtless considers her due with as much discernment at nineteen as at any subsequent period of her life.

Miss Quilter was an excellent governess, her establishment was conducted on principles of rigorous seclusion, befitting such a nunnery of modern times; yet a little bird told *me* that her pupils, of all ages, were in the habit of discussing with considerable freedom the relative influence of the sexes, and that in one of their parliaments, held under a certain sycamore on summer afternoons after school-hours, little Miss Moffat, whose frock barely reached her ankles, was heard to declare, that in *her* opinion no

girl of spirit should be contented with less than two admirers on hand at once, or accept an offer of marriage till she had already refused three!

Jane Lee, then the tallest, the handsomest, the most daring and precocious of these budding beauties, cannot but have studied such subjects — theoretically at least— with sufficient attention to form her own ideas, and act up to her own opinions. She was no blundering novice, stumbling here, slipping there, and breaking her head or her heart against an obstacle, in the flurry and confusion of unaccustomed ignorance. She seemed rather an experienced mariner, who had carefully conned charts and taken bearings for the traversing of latitudes as yet unexplored; so that, in spite of his seniority, his manhood, his acquirements, and his calling, Mervyn Strange was a mere puppet in her hands. She could fool, tease, soothe, or provoke him at will, and was likely to give him about as much rope, show him about as much mercy, as the cat already mentioned affords to a mouse, or the kitten to its ball of string.

CHAPTER VIII

BRED IN THE BONE

"WHY do you never come near us, Mr. Strange? No, I won't shake hands. I shake hands with people who are glad to see me, and you're not."

He had schooled himself to be ice and marble, so the something that shot through him like an electric current while she spoke was of no consequence whatever.

"I—I looked in as I happened to be passing," he stammered. "I had no idea I should find you at home."

"That's just what I say. If you had, you wouldn't have come! Well, now you *are* here you can make yourself useful. In the first place, help me to tie up these roses in one bunch. Not that way! How clumsy men are! Their fingers are all thumbs!"

Her taper hands touched his own; their heads were bent over the posy; he could feel her breath on his cheek. What a mercy that he could make up his mind not to care for her! Without such preparation, the position would have been dangerous in the extreme. He had taken a second-class at Oxford, was a man of abilities over the average, a good theologian, well read in classical authors, ancient history, modern literature, and he was racking his brains for something to say to a girl of nineteen, yet could elicit no more original remark than the obvious truism that "Flowers are very beautiful," adding, as a brilliant afterthought, "You—you are fond of flowers, Miss Lee?"

"No, I'm not!" she answered. "I hate the order and neatness of a garden; I hate everything prim, and tame, and artificial. I should like to be a savage, Mr. Strange, and dress skins in a wigwam!"

But for his late resolutions, he felt how willingly he would have exchanged the high black waistcoat, soft hat, long skirts, and decent externals of a Christian minister,

for beads, blanket, war-paint, and wampum, with such a squaw as this to warm the lodge and brighten the wilderness by her smiles, but he remonstrated gravely, nevertheless.

"You cannot be in earnest, Miss Lee; you cannot wish to barter the comforts of home, the privileges, the luxuries, the social advantages of civilisation, for a mere animal existence, limited to such wants and pleasures as are shared by the beasts of the field."

"Say rather the birds of the air. Fancy the delight of being free. No clocks, no regular meals, no afternoon calls, no reading, no writing, no duty towards your neighbour, and above all, no friends!"

He was hurt, and showed it.

"That is not a kind speech," said he. "Perhaps the friends might feel lonely, though *you* would not!"

"Who is there to miss me?" she asked, bending her dark eyes on him, with an expression half tender, half scornful, but wholly perplexing, that pleased and pained him at the same time. "Few girls of my age are so much alone in the world. I don't complain. I shouldn't like a lot of brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins. The ordinary humdrum relationships of life would only fret and provoke me, and make me worse than I am. No, it is better to be a wild bird, out of the nest for good and all, flying from tree to tree, at its own will, to perch on any branch it fancies. If I were to pack up my traps, and disappear to-morrow morning, nobody knows where, I don't believe I should be missed one bit, and I'm sure I shouldn't care whether I were or not!"

"You cannot mean it," he replied, in some agitation. "It grieves me to hear you speak like that. It seems so sad, so unnatural for such a—such a—such a—person as yourself, with youth, health, a good education, good looks"—

She interrupted him.

"Stop a moment, good looks are a matter of opinion; and granting that I had them, what's the use of being good-looking, with nobody to look at one?"

"There's many a gem of purest ray serene," he murmured, for in truth, such was the man's discomfiture in this unequal warfare that he was fain to fall back on memory, rather than trust ingenuity, for continuance of a contest that threatened his downfall at every turn.

"I know," she replied, laughing; "but I'm *not* serene,

and I don't want to blush unseen—I don't want to blush at all. Nothing makes one look such a fool, Mr. Strange."

"Miss Lee"—

"I don't like you to call me Miss Lee. It sounds stiff and formal. I suppose it wouldn't be right for you to call me Jane?"

He turned pale. All his good resolutions were forgotten.

"I'm not sure."

"And yet Mr. Paravant does, and you're a great deal older than James."

The good resolutions came back with a rush, but brought with them not a shade of colour to his cheek. Called her by her Christian name, did he?—that cub!—and she let him! To be sure, Forward James might not have asked permission. After all, what did it matter to *him*? He was vexed to find himself irritated by such a trifle!

"Shall I tell you the name I always think of you by?" he asked, with a little tremble of the voice that no doubt she marked and understood. "Dark, beautiful, shadowy, vague as a dream, mysterious as night; for me you have never been Miss Lee; anybody could be Miss Lee: you are my Beltenebrosa."

She had not an idea what it meant, but her black eyes flashed, and a flush of pleasure rose to her brow.

"Beltenebrosa!" she repeated. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Strange; what a lovely name! I shall always call myself Beltenebrosa, and it will remind me of you. How nice to be so wise! to have read everything, to remember everything, to know everything. Yes, a man had better be clever than young, or strong, or even handsome. James Paravant might have puzzled a long time before he found me such a name as that. It's too charming; say it again."

Did she know how she tortured him? how this proud, sensitive, conscientious spirit winced and withered under the alternate applications of ice and fire so mercilessly imposed? Let us hope not. Let us hope that the higher aspirations, the deeper sufferings of a character like this, were as unintelligible as they would have been impossible to the nature she inherited with her gipsy beauty and her gipsy blood.

If she had one prevailing desire, one dominating instinct, it was a wild longing for freedom—the real

practical freedom of open air, common, woodland, and moor. It seemed to rise and stir in her veins like the sap in a young tree that puts forth its leaves, dons its holiday attire, and, so to speak, stretches out its branches to meet the spring. For her, the wealth of grey, and green, and pink, and white, and lavender that deepens an English landscape in early June, like some beautiful matron arrayed for a wedding-feast, was no inanimate abstraction to be admired, but an actual living personality to be loved. While she drank in their beauty through all her senses, she would fain have identified herself with the breeze, the cloud, the broken water, the dancing sunshine, and merged her own being in that Nature, which appeared to her less the effect than the great first cause of generation, life and light. Sitting out of doors whenever she had the opportunity, she seemed to gain strength and refreshment from air and light, as others do from food and wine. The arch of heaven was her natural roof-tree, and only in the boundless freedom of space did she feel thoroughly at home. Even in her schooldays she would look wistfully towards Kensington Gardens, as, passing to and from Miss Quilter's polite establishment, she coasted that urban wilderness, which prevents Londoners from completely forgetting the poetry of outdoor life, the hidden charm that lies in groves and glades, summer skies, breaking buds, and teeming bursts of Nature, vindicating her immortality, when

> Every clod feels a stir of might,
> An instinct within it that reaches and towers,
> And grasping blindly above it for light,
> Climbs to a soul in grass and flowers.

In the meantime she turned her bewildering glances on Mervyn Strange, as if she had no thought nor feeling in the universe but for him. He was losing his head.

"Will you give me one of those roses?" said he, bending towards the cluster in her hand. "I—I shall value it exceedingly. I am so fond of roses."

It was a lame conclusion. Shy men generally begin by asking for a flower, and probably so innocent a request is a fair challenge enough, and as good as any other. Rosalind, if I remember right, recommends an attempt at kissing as the least indelicate resource for breaking the awkward silence sometimes observed in such interviews; but so compromising an expedient seems more trying to

both parties, as involving immediate action for attack and defence; nor do I think that a diffident suitor extricates himself from such a position quite to his own satisfaction, or that of his companion. The curate must have meant to finish his sentence very differently, as the young lady perhaps expected, but for the sudden appearance of Mr. Tregarthen crossing the lawn, with a less assured step than usual, and a strange expression of concern, even dismay, on his florid, prosperous face. Crushing a yellow envelope in his hand, he took no notice of Strange, but walked straight up to Miss Lee.

"Jane," he said, speaking, though hoarse and thick, in a very kind voice, — "Jane, my dear young lady, Mrs. Tregarthen wishes to see you immediately. In the drawing-room, if you please. Now, this moment, my dear. You will find her quite alone."

And the two disappeared within the French windows, leaving Mervyn Strange outside, to congratulate himself on the escape he had made, or ponder on the chance he had thrown away.

But he could not tear himself from the place. Curiosity, interest, affection, even anxiety, anchored him to a spot so lately hallowed by the presence of his Beltenebrosa. Would she come back before dinner, and if so, should he take up the thread of his discourse where he had left off, or wait for a fairer opportunity, or tear this weakness from his heart, and give up the idea once for all? Such renunciation seemed feasible enough this morning; was it possible now? With a keen pang, it occurred to him that the sacrifice might be uncalled for, after all. What was this sudden communication, obviously telegraphic, this important message, to be delivered privately in the drawing-room, and by Mrs. Tregarthen herself? Surely it must mean an offer of marriage, conveyed indeed on the electric wire, yet none the less importunate for that. And if so, was he a broken-hearted man? Had it come to this? He rather thought he was.

"Then let the stricken deer go weep," he murmured, with an aching sense of desolation, a longing desire for solitude, silence, and stupor, perhaps, rather than repose.

At such a moment he could but impatiently support the presence of a person he disliked so much as young Mr. Paravant.

Forward James, however, enjoying a happy uncon-

sciousness that he was ever unwelcome, swung into the rectory garden and clicked the gate behind him, with a jaunty air of self-possession and content. He, too, had been employing his leisure in pondering on the charms of our young lady and her reception of his advances, to arrive at the conclusion that she was fully sensible of his merits, and ("gals were all alike") only assumed a little coyness and reluctance, for the purpose of "bringing him on." He returned to the rectory garden an hour before dinner, in the hope of resuming a *tête-à-tête* too abruptly broken off, and was sorely disappointed when he saw the curate hovering about the spot where he expected to find Jane Lee.

The two men disliked each other cordially. But what would you have? This is a world of shams—even far away in quiet Somerset, they were obliged to be civil, and say "How d'ye do?"

"Nice weather for haymaking," observed the younger, wiping from his brow some drops of perspiration, the result of uneasiness rather than temperature. "I've got forty acres down in Appleton-Cleves. I should be out more than a 'pony' if it came on to rain, I suppose you won't pray for fine weather on Sunday, shall you?"

Strange looked displeased. "You had better ask the rector," said he stiffly. "The welfare of humanity is not dependent on Appleton hay-harvest, but he will meet your wishes, no doubt."

"Oh! I don't want to put him out of his way, nor you neither," answered the other, with perfect equanimity. "In fact, I daresay I shall not be at church myself. I should like to see Tregarthen, though, before I go home to-night. I was thinking of dining here."

"The rector has received some important news, and I fancy would rather not be disturbed. He came out just now, much agitated and perplexed. It is not five minutes since he went into the house."

"And Miss Lee?"

"And Miss Lee."

Both coloured at the mention of her name, both turned paler the next moment, each felt he had read the other's secret and exposed his own. If either entertained any previous doubt or hesitation, his intentions were fixed and decided now. There was the prize, here stood his rival. It must be a stand-up fight, and let the best man win!

CHAPTER IX

"AND IS OLD DOUBLE DEAD?"

"COMPOSE yourself, my dear," said Mrs. Tregarthen, as the glass doors closed behind Miss Lee, shutting out the scent of flowers, the song of birds, the smiling summer sky, and her two lovers eyeing each other on the lawn;—"compose yourself, I—I—have something very painful to communicate!"

The good lady was shaking all over—hands, cap, ribbons, chain, lockets, and general exterior vibrated like the leaves on a poplar in a breeze.

"Let me break it to her, Selina," interrupted the rector. "Compose yourself, my dear; we must all encounter these trials soon or late!"

The girl looked from one to the other, with head up and muscles braced; her dark eyes glared and shone like those of a wild animal trapped by hunters, a *fera naturæ* of some fierce and restless order, such as the leopardess, the wild-cat, or the lynx.

"Don't keep me in suspense," she said. "Out with it! I can bear *anything!*"

"My dear, your guardian," sobbed the rector's wife, and fairly burst into tears.

"Mr. Lopez, my dear," added the rector, in a calmer voice, yet sadly troubled too. "So sudden, so unlooked-for! I had not received the telegram five minutes before I came to you"—

She drew herself up, tall, handsome, and defiant.

"He's dead, I know he is!" she answered. "I am left without a soul to care for me in the world!"

Mr. and Mrs. Tregarthen looked at each other in sore perplexity. Had she wept, or screamed, or gone into

hysterics, or done anything that warranted the application of sherry and sal volatile, they would have known how to act; but this was a new experience, a phase of grief they had never before seen or realised. The girl's limbs were rigid, her face pale and set, not softened in any degree by so awful a calamity, but rather wild and stern, as though accepting such an injury less in sorrow than in anger.

"You have anticipated me," said the rector. "Alas, my dear, your forebodings are too true!" and proceeded with much circumlocution, many reflections — logical, obvious, perfectly indisputable, yet none the more consolatory—to relate such particulars as he had gathered from the telegram of her guardian's demise. These were scanty, but clear and conclusive enough. Jack Lopez had been ailing after dinner, in a doctor's hands at midnight, and dead before morning. It was a commonplace event, and, out of his own immediate circle, affected nobody but a few creditors who held his bills, of which they were already beginning to suspect the worthlessness. Said one Jew to another, meeting in a stone-paved passage by Stag's Court—

"Have you heard about Shack Lopez?"

"Broke, is he?" was the reply. "I've known it these three months."

"Worse than that, mine friend. He's dead. Went off the hooks this morning at sunrise."

"Glad he don't owe me anything. Shack couldn't pay twopence in the pound. Poor Shack! what a fool he was!"

And this was Jack's epitaph. Shorter and less complimentary than that pronounced by Justice Shallow on the bowman defunct—"And is old Double dead?" Few of us can expect more. For one or two the columns of a daily paper are ruled in black; to half a dozen it vouchsafes an incorrect biography of the smallest type; a few score find a place at the end of the year in "our obituary of notable persons deceased"; but to your disappearance and mine, the general public will, in all probability, be profoundly indifferent. Only a former friend or two, an acquaintance here and there, who deals in the latest news, will stop for a moment to ask carelessly, "And is old Double dead?"

Was it worth while to "shoot a good shoot" for such obsequies as these? Yes, it is always worth while to shoot a good shoot! Stand up like a man, bend your bow, straighten your back, draw your arrow to the head, aim

true and steady; whether you get an outer or an inner ring, a white, a gold, a bull's-eye, or miss the target altogether, do your level best, and never doubt but that, according to your intentions, not your merits, you will take a prize.

History fails to inform us how old Double cut up, but when his executors administered the affairs of Jack Lopez, except for a sum of five hundred pounds secured to Jane Lee, he did not leave behind him a shilling. Like many another speculator, he seemed to have spent his money as fast as he made it; gambling in all kinds of stocks and shares, so as to lose with one hand what he gained with the other. Generous on occasion, but never just, extravagant at all times, and often dishonest, quick, acute, versatile, with a strong belief in his own luck, he was fond of boasting that it was his nature to be "a man or a mouse," and that he would die a millionaire or a beggar. It appeared subsequently that he meant to make his ward sole heiress of the noble fortune he hoped to acquire, but these magnificent intentions have nothing to do with my story, as they were never carried out.

It was a melancholy evening at the rectory. Jane Lee could not be induced to leave her room. Paravant and Strange, informed, rather incoherently, by their hostess, of the calamity that had befallen, felt it only decent to take leave, and Mr. Tregarthen sat down to dinner with his wife, much perplexed as to what should be done and how to do it. Ought he to offer the bereaved young lady a home? Perhaps she had no other friends. At her age, and—and—with her appearance, she must not be turned loose on the world. What did Selina think? Selina, as usual, saw both sides of the question, prepared to approve whichever he did *not*. She pointed out, with some truth, that the rector might find himself in a false position, from which extrication would be difficult, whether he adopted one course or the other. If the girl were penniless, and he offered her a home, it would be exceedingly awkward for all parties; but again, if she turned out to be an heiress, and he made no sign, would they not lose the benefit of her friendship, and their share, however small, in the eventual advantages of her wealth? It was not for want of discussion, that when tea went into the drawing-room, nothing had been settled but that the Rev. Silas should proceed to London next day by an early train, and learn what he

"I am going home"

could. In the meantime, Mrs. Tregarthen would do all in her power, without committing him, to console poor Jane, and, as she phrased it, "keep the girl easy in her mind."

In difficulties of a domestic nature, the decisions at which people arrive are almost always upset as soon as made. Mr. and Mrs. Tregarthen, congratulating themselves that for the present they had solved a knotty point, and put off their trouble to a future day, were somewhat startled and discomfited by the opening of the drawing-room door, and the apparition of Jane Lee on the threshold, tall, pale, and noiseless as a ghost. She entered the apartment perfectly calm and self-possessed, to take up a position, with much dignity, bolt upright in front of the master of the house, who half rose and sat timidly down again, fairly overawed.

"Mr. Tregarthen," she said, calmly enough, "I leave here to-morrow morning. I am come to wish you and Mrs. Tregarthen good-bye. Don't look at me like that. I am going home—straight home. I *must* see him before he's screwed down!"

"Oh, Jane!" exclaimed the rector's wife.

"I *must* see him," she repeated, in the same monotonous voice, while her eyes wandered vaguely over the other's face and figure. "I have got to say good-bye; I have got to ask him to come back to me, if people ever do come back. But that's all nonsense. When they go from here they go for good, if they go anywhere; but I don't believe a word of all that!"

Mrs. Tregarthen looked inexpressibly shocked. She could find no words to reply, while, turning to the rector, Jane Lee proceeded, without altering a muscle of her countenance—

"I shall start early. The train passes before nine. If he knows anything now, he will know I got to him as soon as I could."

"My dear, you can't go alone," gasped the rector's wife.

"Why not? I came here alone. Good-night, Mrs. Tregarthen; good-night, everybody. It's all over now. *Bon soir la compagnie!*" and she walked out of the drawing-room, sad and dreamy as Ophelia, but stern and resolute as Lady Macbeth.

"I had better take her with me," said the rector, after

a long thoughtful pause. "We shall have to be off in good time—I think I'll go to bed at once. Will you tell them about breakfast, Selina? We shall want it earlier than usual."

He rose from his arm-chair, but sank back before he could get fairly on his feet.

"By all that's—that's—well—that's detestable!" exclaimed the rector, "I've got it again. If it had only come on last week, or waited till next! I was half afraid of it! I didn't feel right yesterday—you shouldn't have let me drink port-wine and cider the same day. It's too provoking! It does seem so hard! Now it's really caught hold of me, I shall not be able to move for a fortnight, and as for going to London to-morrow, I might just as well think of going to Peru!"

The rector's apprehensions were not unreasonable. It was simply an attack of lumbago—his old enemy, that when it got him down would keep him down, he well knew, as effectually as if he had been screwed into his arm-chair. In vain his Selina mixed him hot drinks of a comforting nature, and turning him over on the connubial four-poster, rubbed hartshorn and oil into his back till her own hands were sore. By two o'clock in the morning it seemed clear enough that the Rev. Silas was incapacitated from moving a limb, while his wife, through the two hideous nightcaps she persisted in wearing, could hear Jane Lee making preparations for immediate departure in her bedroom overhead.

Mrs. Tregarthen was a person of resource. Even could she have been induced to leave her husband in his present state of helplessness—a desertion, to do her justice, she contemplated not for an instant—a railway journey terminating in London, with the charge of anybody or anything, was an undertaking of which she felt perfectly incapable, and therefore it never entered her head to accompany Miss Lee; but she reflected that what people cannot do for themselves other people can do for them, and as she argued, "What's the use of a curate except to take his rector's duty, and stand in his rector's place?" Yes, if he were ten years older perhaps it would be better; but in great emergencies one must not be too particular. Mervyn Strange, to use her own words, was "as steady as old Time," and Mervyn Strange should take the girl to London, since to London she persisted in going, under a

promise from both that, after making all necessary arrangements for the funeral, they would return by mail-train that same night.

The curate, before his shaving-glass, at six o'clock on a summer's morning, was no less startled than pleased to receive from Mrs. Tregarthen the following brief and dictatorial missive:—

"DEAR MR. STRANGE,—Knowing you are an early riser, I am not afraid this will find you in bed. The rector is laid up with rheumatism, and I wish you therefore to take his place in escorting Miss Lee to London by the nine o'clock train. I expect you both to return to-night by the mail. Please come at once to the rectory for further directions.—Yours sincerely,

"SELINA TREGARTHEN.

"*P.S.*—Of course I need not remind you that in committing such a charge to your care, I rely implicitly on your character for common sense and discretion."

That the curate should have selected a newer suit of clothes, a neater pair of boots than those laid out for his usual wear, only infers that he was mortal, and foolishly in love with Jane Lee. That he should have accepted such a trust, however joyfully, with many misgivings and mental reservations, infers that, like the rest of us, he had no objection to rush on his fate blindfold, so long as his own hands might tie the bandage over his eyes; but that he should have packed a small portmanteau with garments enough to last a week, argued a character replete with foresight and precaution equal to all emergencies, and, while hoping for the best, prepared to confront the worst.

He was shocked, though, and deeply moved, to mark the alteration one night of sorrow had made in the beautiful features of Jane Lee. As she stepped over the threshold into the summer morning, he started, as from a blow, to observe the contrast of that pale, drawn face with the glad sunshine and the fresh blooming flowers. He had not the heart to pull one from its stalk and offer it to the mourner, but he thought sadly enough of poor Ophelia, with her rosemary and rue. After a few hasty injunctions from Mrs. Tregarthen, he handed her respectfully into the fly, and took his own seat by the driver, on the box, without a word. She appreciated this forbearance, we may be sure, nor was her passionate grief for the loss of her guardian so engrossing as to stifle certain tender feelings of gratitude, and even preference, created by the sympathy and consideration of Mervyn Strange.

CHAPTER X

SIXTY-MILE-AN-HOUR

A MAN in love, at least under middle age, is usually an early riser. James Paravant, with forty acres of grass down in Appleton-Cleves, thought well to visit his haymakers before breakfast. Returning from that fertile meadow-land by the high-road, he thus met the very fly that conveyed Miss Lee to the station, and, catching a glimpse of her face in the conveyance, felt much surprise and vexation to recognise Mervyn Strange on the box. So complete was his discomfiture, he had not even presence of mind to stop the carriage, in order to wish its occupant good-bye, but stood gaping in the road, utterly paralysed and overcome. He pulled himself together, as people unused to emergencies generally do, just when it was too late, but showed a deal of misapplied energy in trying to make up for lost time.

In three minutes he was at his own stable-door, nearly half a mile off, vociferating like a madman for groom and helpers. Forward James, as he often boasted, liked to ride "something that could gallop a bit"; and, to do him justice, seemed quite capable of making the animal exert its powers. In his present state of excitement he was not disposed to let the grass grow under his feet.

"Isaac! Reuben!" he shouted, as two close-cropped heads and four bare arms to match appeared from the hay-loft. "Reuben! Isaac! Here, one of you! Clap a saddle on Potboy. Be smart, man alive! Not that bridle—the Pelham. Don't hang at it for an hour! Have the horse turned round and ready by the time I come down!" Then he rushed upstairs to cram some money into his pockets and put on a better hat.

I suppose none of us ever ordered a horse out in a hurry, not even on emergencies involving matters of life and death, without experiencing certain hindrances and

delays caused by too religious an observance of those stable rites that the most careless of grooms would rather perish than forego. By accustomed hands, the animal can be stripped, saddled, turned round and bridled in about two minutes; but it seems impossible for it to leave the stable under five. Each foot must be lifted and examined, perhaps blacked, the mane set straight, combed, and finally water-brushed. Nothing — not even a running accompaniment of curses, as Paravant found to his extreme disgust—can be made to hasten these operations.

Miss Lee and her escort had already taken their seats in a first-class carriage when Forward James, lengthening a stirrup as he went, passed through his own gate into the high-road at a gallop. But Potboy could slip along when he was extended, and, under the impression no doubt that he was running for money, therefore, judging by his own experience, likely to be pulled up before he could win, laid himself out in such good form as to bring his master into the station within seven minutes of the start from his own stable-door. Both were exceedingly hot and uncomfortable. The horse relieved his feelings by a shake, the rider by an oath; for the latter only gained the platform as a train glided from it with asthmatic puffs and one of those defiant whistles that seem to say, "Catch me if you can!"

It is out of my power to explain why Paravant should have felt so disappointed, or what he intended to do had he arrived in time. I do not believe he could give any definite reason for being so hard on Potboy, or that he had formed any plan in his own mind for hindrance of the fugitives. His heart was on fire, his head in a whirl. He had never been accustomed to reflection, self-control, or discipline of any kind, and rode his horse as fast as it could lay legs to the ground, simply because the violent exercise and excitement served for the moment to take him out of himself.

Flurried, disordered, red-hot, and in a profuse perspiration, he felt painfully conscious that he looked like a fool as he gazed after the departing train; nor did it tend to restore his equanimity that he might be seen by two of the travellers in this ridiculous plight, and laughed at for his pains. He recovered, however, after a time, and availed himself of his intimacy with the stationmaster to make some inquiries, while he lit a cigar.

"Any passengers this morning?" he asked, with such affectation of carelessness as could only deceive a preoccupied official, ruler in hand and pencil in mouth.

"Two—first-class, Mr. Paravant," answered the station-master, "and one second. Did you miss the train, sir? I thought perhaps as you might have been going up along of Mr. Strange."

"Mr. Strange? Not I. Was he travelling alone?"

"Well, sir, I think not. He took two tickets for Paddington—returns they was—available by the down express."

Returns! Paravant felt that a load had been lifted from his heart. She was coming back, then, and he should see her again! The relief from pain amounted to actual pleasure, and he could hardly bear even Strange a grudge for taking away his idol, since he seemed pledged to bring it back again. How miserable he would have felt had he heard of her departure by accident, and remained uncertain of her return! How well Potboy had brought him! What a good little horse it was! and how lucky he came straight to the station!

He would have thought differently, perhaps, had he overheard a conversation between the two people in whom he was so deeply interested, that originated in his sudden appearance, and might never have taken place but for his late arrival.

"There's James Paravant, I declare!" said Miss Lee, pulling up the window, as the train increased its speed. "What on earth can have brought *him* to the station?"

"I think I can guess," answered Mervyn Strange, arranging her wraps and belongings with tender care. "He came to see the last of you, and to wish you good-bye."

He was pleased to think she had woke up out of her sorrow enough to notice anything, and encouraged her to talk, even about his rival, rather than not talk at all.

"And he *has* seen the last of me," she replied, with perfect composure. "I don't think I shall ever come back to Somersetshire again."

"But I've got our return-tickets in my pocket!" exclaimed the clergyman, feeling his brain turn giddy in a whirl of impossibilities suggested by this startling declaration of independence.

"People should never take returns," said the girl.

"How do we know we shall come back? A thousand things might happen. In the first place, it's very easy to be killed on a railway. Why, how fast do you suppose we are going now?"

"Sixty-mile-an-hour."

"I enjoy it! I think it's my nature to go sixty-mile-an-hour. I wish we were always flying through the air at this pace."

"So do I, Miss Lee, with my present companion."

"I told you not to call me Miss Lee; I like the other name best. Say it now, this minute."

"Beltenebrosa."

He had a deep, grave, mellow voice, capable of much inflection, which the habit of intoning had brought to a high state of cultivation. It was full of tenderness while he dwelt on the beloved syllables, and the girl could not but acknowledge its charm.

In her sorrow and loneliness she was ready to catch at any momentary respite from the dull, dead pain that seemed to eat her heart away, and she found more than a distraction in the influence she exercised over her companion.

He was so kind, so considerate, so gentle and sympathetic, how could she but respond; and, after all, what did it signify? A few sweet words, a soft glance, a whisper interrupted by a sigh, these were little more than courtesies absolutely exacted by the occasion. They meant nothing in reality, and need have no result. For some natures, such are merely the small change of a currency used in daily life; for others they represent capital and interest, boundless wealth, or utter beggary and ruin. The man was playing for all he had with losing cards; the woman, so to speak, staked but a few shillings, and held a winning hand.

"At Swindon already!" she exclaimed, more gaily than she had spoken yet, as the flying express brought them into that crowded, bustling station. "Yes, it's a capital train; if it wasn't for the cause I should like my journey very much. Oh, Mr. Strange, you'll wait for me while I go and wish him good-bye!"

Her voice changed, her face fell, her whole frame seemed to collapse, and the curate felt he would willingly have sacrificed a limb to purchase the slightest mitigation of her distress.

"Do you think I would desert you?" he replied, in

those full musical tones. "Miss Lee"— She held up her finger, and smiled through her tears. "Well, Beltenebrosa, I ask nothing better than to shield you from every trouble, share with you every sorrow, and, if needs must, take your part against everybody and everything!"

She gave him a fine look, and rapidly averted her eyes. Slight as was her insight into such matters, and purely theoretical, she had yet a feminine consciousness that this chivalrous declaration must surely be tantamount to an offer. It was absurd, though provoking, that she could not help reverting to little Miss Moffat's matrimonial opinions at such a time.

"You are very kind to me," she murmured, returning gently a pressure of the hand he laid on hers. "Mr. Strange, you have a good heart, and oh, I am so forlorn, so forsaken, so thoroughly alone in the world!"

"My darling! my own! shelter for life in my arms, in my breast! I will give up all here and hereafter, for your sake!" was the answer that would have risen tumultuously to his lips, but for the application, at this critical moment, of a repressive appliance called the brake, which brought their train to a standstill in fifty yards, and reminded the travellers, even before a guard's bearded face appeared at their window, of the velocity with which they had sped. Morally and physically, we can best appreciate the pace we have been going by the jerk when we stop.

Whether proposals of marriage are often hazarded in railway carriages, I cannot take upon me to say; but I imagine that, to prove successful, they must be completed at leisure along the line, rather than offered in disjointed phrases, amidst the bustle and confusion of a station, and that station such a junction as Swindon.

Mervyn Strange would have been more than a man, to finish what he had to say in the presence of a ticket-collector, two porters, and a waspish lady, who entered the compartment with several parcels, a novel, a canary-bird, and an unwholesome son. But he thought Jane Lee understood his meaning, nevertheless. When he looked at her, she averted her eyes; when she spoke to him, it was in the low-pitched voice that seems even more confiding than a whisper. Though he anticipated her wants and wishes, pulling the window up and down a score of times between Didcot and Reading, she never thanked him in words, only with a soft, shy smile, and lastly, gliding into

Paddington Station, when he murmured, "How soon! How quick we have come! I hope you're not tired!" there was a world of meaning in her gentle answer, "Tired? oh no! I wish it could all be done over again."

The waspish lady entertained not the slightest doubt they were engaged, and liked them none the better, we may be sure.

They had been travelling, you see, at the rate of sixty-mile-an-hour, a pace which soon brings people to their ultimate destination. Jane Lee liked it, she said, and in my opinion was calculated to sustain such velocity with more impunity than her companion.

When Mervyn Strange helped her out, she looked and felt perfectly calm, whereas his blood was in a fever and his head in a whirl.

A drive in a four-wheeled cab through crowded London streets, even with the most charming of women, provided she be accompanied by her luggage, soon brings a man to his senses. He must shout at the top of his voice to have the slightest chance of being heard, and no romance that ever poet dreamed can be proof against the constant stoppages and interruptions of such a progress, not to mention the annoyance of bags and bonnet-boxes sliding off the front seat on his feet every ten seconds. It was but a shilling fare from Paddington Station to Jane Lee's old home in Tyburnia, yet the curate had time to recover himself, and make some attempt at a return to common sense, before the cab stopped with a jolt at the house where poor Jack Lopez was lying dead.

The blinds were down, the doorsteps dirty, the whole place looked very desolate. After some delay the bell was answered by a slipshod woman, not strictly sober, and Mervyn Strange began to understand how delicate was the task he had undertaken, how false the position in which he was placed.

Yet now, more than ever, did he realise the friendlessness of this black-browed beauty, and, following her soberly and sadly into the house of mourning, registered a vow that, so long as he was above ground, come what might, his Beltenebrosa should never want a champion and a friend.

CHAPTER XI

COMPROMISE

IT is not my intention to dwell on the obsequies of a Jewish money-lender. Those of poor Jack Lopez were conducted in accordance with the impressive rites of his people and his faith. The funeral oration pronounced over his remains by a white-bearded Rabbi would doubtless have done honour to one of the patriarchs, but as it was spoken in the grand sonorous tongue that preached to the followers of Moses in the wilderness, beneath Mount Sinai, I cannot vouch for its allusions or its purport. They buried him with the proper ceremonies, and Mervyn Strange only regretted that such difference of belief as he was the last person to overlook, prevented his reading the touching service of his own Church over this Hebrew grave.

But the curate had his hands full, nevertheless. In the first place, immediately on arrival in London, he was obliged to apprise Mrs. Tregarthen by letter that it would be impossible to return the same night, taking his chance of that lady's indignation at such flagrant disobedience, and the untoward construction she might put on his delay. In the next, he must provide a resting-place for Miss Lee, who could not possibly remain in her old home under the circumstances, and of whose fair fame it behoved him to be more than careful in such an emergency. With a discretion which deserved some credit, he suggested Miss Quilter as a proper person to receive her former pupil, and was pleased to find this proposal less distasteful to the young lady than he had feared.

Jane Lee, after a protracted visit to the solemn chamber in which all that remained of her guardian was laid out, came downstairs in that dejected frame of mind which seems only desirous of being absolved from trouble, responsibility, and necessity for thought or action. She

offered no objections whatever, accompanying the curate to Bayswater with unusual meekness, only stipulating that, when all was over, she should pay one farewell visit to the Jewish burial-ground where Lopez was to be interred.

But the suspicious, intuitive sagacity of love had already taught Mervyn Strange that the moods of Beltenebrosa changed no less suddenly than the skies of an English May.

While thankful to have succeeded thus far, he by no means underrated the difficulties to come. The girl might turn round on him at any moment and demand release from a control he had no shadow of right to enforce. The governess, too, might decline to receive a former pupil, under such abnormal conditions, into an establishment of which the very keystone seemed conformity to the usages of society and opinions of the world.

Here, however, he was to be agreeably disappointed. Miss Quilter, though a schoolmistress of mature age, was, nevertheless, romantic in her tastes, and jumped to conclusions like a girl. While she folded Miss Lee in a condescending embrace, and made an elaborate curtsey to Mervyn Strange, whom she subsequently described as "a striking-looking person, and highly intellectual," she sketched out a pretty little love-story, of which the couple before her were hero and heroine, taking it for granted they must be regularly and decorously engaged. Whatever embarrassments might hereafter result from these rose-coloured speculations, they seemed at least to facilitate his task for the present, and Mervyn Strange expressed himself—as indeed he felt—sincerely grateful for the good lady's cordiality and support. Though dignified, she was affable, and hospitably inclined besides.

"It is most fortunate," she observed, with stately politeness, "that in such an emergency I should have a spare room at my disposal. Had it been during the vacation, as you are well aware, my dear, I could have offered you a greater choice of apartments, but you will give me credit for good intentions, and take the will for the deed."

From long practice, and close attention to the best models, Miss Quilter was able to command the choicest language, which she used with appropriate gesture. She

spoke, indeed, "like a book," and made, as was to be expected, a startling impression on Mervyn Strange.

Few of us are close observers, or how disagreeable society would become; therefore all young men and many old consider women of mature age, in matters of the affections, to be what they are pleased to term "out of the hunt." But only watch the effect of a love-song, well executed, on a drawing-room audience, and you will never assent to such a fallacy again. Hitherto, probably, you have not taken your eyes off the young—henceforth watch the faces of the old. Over sunken cheek and furrowed brow and faded eyes, you will mark a ripple from the "long ago," moving and quivering like the circles on some calm grey mountain tarn, when you drop a stone in its breast, that stirs the sullen surface, because it has touched the cold dark depths below.

It was but the other night I detected tears stealing down a cheek that I remembered once fresh and fair amongst the freshest and the fairest. They ran through wrinkles, and were choked by rouge, but something told me they came up from a heart in which there was one spot left that could ache for a memory long dead and buried, yet unforgotten still. I was *not* amused, only sorry and perplexed, for it seems sad to get old without inheriting the immunities of age.

Miss Quilter had neither rouge nor—to do her justice—wrinkles on her staid, hard-featured face; but her eyes were wet while she embraced her former pupil for the second time, and offered the curate a bony hand to shake, thus conferring on him, as it were, the freedom of the establishment with her own royal assent.

"I see," she said, in reply to his earnest and somewhat confused appeal. "Although I must withhold my approval until I am better informed as to details, this young lady may be assured of my sympathy, both in her loss and her gain."

Jane Lee stared, the curate blushed, and Miss Quilter, to whom the embarrassment of any false position was perfectly unintelligible, passed calmly on.

"The mournful ceremony, you give me to understand, will take place to-morrow. My dear Miss Lee—on such an occasion I feel constrained to call you by your Christian name—my dear Jane, you will, I trust, consider my house your home. This gentleman, too, Mr.—if I mistake not—

Mr. Strange, will, I hope, take his meals here at his convenience, though custom forbids me to offer him the shelter of my roof under existing circumstances. Perhaps, at some future time, after a decent interval, I shall have the pleasure of receiving you both."

Jane Lee started like a woman awaking out of sleep.

"You are mistaken!" she exclaimed. "Miss Quilter, I—I don't think you seem exactly to understand."

"Perfectly, my dear, perfectly. And permit me to observe, that Mr.—I believe I am correct—Mr. Strange has shown much proper feeling and exercised a wise discretion in thus taking me into confidence. I will now beg you to excuse me while I give directions for the preparation of your apartment; and I shall hope to see Mr.—yes, Mr. Strange back to dinner at half-past six o'clock."

The visitors looked at each other in silence, nor was there indeed opportunity of explanation, for Strange felt himself fairly bowed out till dinner-time, and Jane Lee was so completely bewildered by the excitement of the day that she could not utter a syllable.

Friendless, desolate, perplexed, at such a moment even her strong nature seemed to give way and float helpless on the tide, accepting the future with that apathy which owes its resignation to despair.

She had been accustomed from childhood to depend on Mr. L——, as she called him, for advice, assistance, and all she required; and it seemed impossible to realise that her friend and protector was gone for evermore, that there was nobody to appeal to, nobody to counsel, nobody to control her now. In this last consideration alone, she found some leavening of comfort, for the wild element in her gipsy nature always longed for freedom, chafing even under government the mildest and most legitimate. This it was that caused her to loathe the bare idea of returning to Somersetshire, and becoming once more the inmate of a respectable country clergyman's house. The domestic routine, the regular meals, the unvarying order and decorum of such an establishment, vexed and irritated her the more that she could not explain why; and although she felt grateful to Mrs. Tregarthen for her kindness, nothing would have pleased her better than to know she was never to set eyes on that primitive and uninteresting person again.

The rector's wife, however, by no means returned this calm indifference. After the down express had arrived, without bringing her absentees, she could hardly sleep a wink, for mingled feelings of anxiety and indignation, that the receipt of Mervyn Strange's letter by next morning's post did little to allay.

"He might have telegraphed," she observed, ignoring that brevity which is no less the soul of electric communication than of wit, and which could not possibly have done justice to the penitence conveyed in four closely written pages from the curate to his rector's wife. "Funeral or no funeral, he ought to have brought her back at the time I fixed. It is most unusual, most indelicate, most insubordinate! The only redeeming point in the whole business is his taking her to Miss Quilter. Mr. Tregarthen, I don't think you attend to what I say!"

But the Rev. Silas could only attend to the pain in his back, that caught him at every turn, when he tried to change his posture on the stool of repentance he was pleased to call an easy-chair.

"She will be home after the funeral, my dear," answered the sufferer, between his groans. "Don't distress yourself. It will all come right. I suppose he has left her everything. I wonder how much it is."

"Something handsome, no doubt," replied the lady. "People always say 'as rich as a Jew.' That's my great difficulty. If she hadn't a farthing I should know what to do."

"We couldn't well turn her out of doors, Selina?" said the rector doubtfully.

"Yes, we could!" answered Selina. "After the way in which they have both behaved, I should not hesitate to send her packing at once, and Mr. Strange too."

"Strange is a good curate, my dear, practical, earnest, industrious; his heart is in his work."

That is to say he took much of the duty, most of the visiting, and all the trouble off his rector's hands. Many a parish priest has just such an invaluable assistant; all are not so ready as the Rev. Silas to acknowledge it.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed his wife. "There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it! He's in *my* black books, I can tell him. And now, it's time for you to take

your taraxacum. My gracious! if here isn't that young gaby Paravant. He's seen me through the open window, and I can't say 'Not at home.'"

Sure enough, Forward James was haunting the accustomed spot. Trusting implicitly in those return-tickets mentioned by the stationmaster, he arrived full of confidence; and never doubting he should have an interview with his beloved, had got himself up for the purpose with peculiar care. So startling a combination of colours has seldom been seen in conjunction with a white hat, relieved by a crape, and, to use his own words, "something neat round his neck." Even Mrs. Tregarthen, who did not profess to be a judge of such matters, felt uncertain whether to admire or deride. James, however, thoroughly satisfied with a revision of his own person in the glass, had no doubts on the subject, and seemed, even to the accustomed perceptions of his hostess, more absurd, more jaunty, more conceited, and altogether more intolerable than usual.

"We've got most of it cut," was the salutation of this bucolic dandy, who considered his own hay-harvest of paramount importance to the universe. "It's a lighter crop than I expected, but if the weather holds up I shan't complain. How's the lumbago, rector? And—and—I say—where's Miss Lee?"

On such a subject it was Selina's privilege to assume the initiative. "The rector's no better," she answered, with some asperity. "And not likely to be unless he takes the advice of people who understand nursing, and know what illness really means. If ever you have a wife of your own, Mr. Paravant, I hope you'll know her value, and mind what she says!"

"Certainly, certainly," answered Paravant, only wishing he *had* a wife of his own, if he could choose her for himself. "I should always do as I'm told, only I've nobody to tell me. And—I say, Mrs. Tregarthen, I suppose your young lady is not down yet—tired with her journey, eh? There's nothing so fatiguing, you know, as being tired."

He was blushing—actually blushing, and the rector's wife, reading him like a book, as any woman might, did not know whether to be most provoked with herself or him, or that least docile of curates, Mervyn Strange.

It was so embarrassing not to feel sure how matters

stood. If Miss Lee turned out an heiress, she would do very nicely for young Paravant; if she had nothing, she might as well marry Mervyn Strange, and thus absolve them from all responsibility in her future; but, until this knot was disentangled, the position seemed sadly embarrassing, and Mrs. Tregarthen by no means underrated the difficulties of her task.

"I don't know, I'm sure, whether she's tired or not," said the rector's wife, moving across the room to give her husband a nauseous mixture that tasted of turpentine and smelt of beeswax. "How should I, more than a hundred miles off? She's in London, James Paravant, that's where *she* is, and, as far as I can make out, that's where she's likely to remain."

"In London!" the young man actually gasped; "and — and, Mrs. Tregarthen, don't you expect her *back*?"

"No, I don't; I never expect anything nowadays. I didn't expect she'd be off by express with Mr. Strange; I didn't expect one's own curate to fly in one's face before one could turn round; I didn't expect the rector to sit in his easy-chair and groan, instead of asserting his authority like a man. It's no use talking to *me* about expecting, James; blessed are those that expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed!"

He turned as white as his hat; and Mrs. Tregarthen, a soft-hearted woman enough, felt her natural indignation at the conduct of the absentees melting into pity for this poor deserted swain.

"I think I'll go home," muttered Paravant, looking helplessly about him. "It's very awkward, you know, Mrs. Tregarthen, all the hay down this catching weather, and my bailiff off to Thornbury revel, of course. If you'll excuse me, I'll go back at once; I ought never to have come away."

There were tears in his voice. Bumpkin as he was, the poor fellow could feel, and it would have relieved him to hide his face in his hands and blubber like a schoolboy.

"I wish I could ask you to dinner," said his hostess kindly; "but the rector can't get out of his chair, and *my* dinner is only a make-believe, as you know, when there's sickness in the house. Good-bye, James. Look in to-morrow, my dear; we're always glad to see you, and

perhaps we shall hear something more by to-night's post."

A small crumb of comfort, but it served this disconsolate young gentleman for luncheon and dinner too. It was a clear case; he had lost his appetite, there could be no further doubt now that he had lost his heart.

CHAPTER XII

CONSENT

"I CAN'T accept it, Mr. Strange."

"Why not?"

"I feel it would be wrong. I am young and inexperienced enough, but I know I must not lay myself under such an obligation to any gentleman in the world."

"But it is so small a sum."

"That is nothing to the purpose. If it was five pounds, instead of five hundred, I ought equally to say No!"

They were sauntering together in Kensington Gardens, a place of all others in which to talk about love, rather than money. Beltenebrosa, tall and pale, in her mourning looked more beautiful than ever; the curate walked by her side with the meekness of a sheep going to the shambles.

Jack Lopez had been laid decorously in the grave. His executors were making the best arrangements they could, at a startling reduction, to satisfy his creditors. Jane Lee's legacy was safe enough, but certain wise precautions of the law would delay its payment for several months. In the meantime she was without a shilling, and Mervyn Strange pressed her hard to accept the loan of five hundred pounds he had recently withdrawn from the sum of one thousand Consols standing in his name at the Bank of England, and constituting indeed his whole available capital.

"Whatever I ask you," said he, and the deep voice quivered with irrepressible pain, "it is always the same. With *me* you never seem to find any difficulty in saying No!"

"Do you think it is so easy?" she answered. "How you mistake me, and how you underrate yourself! Can you not comprehend that the lips must often be taught to say No when the heart means Yes?"

He did mistake her thoroughly. How could he con-

ceive that it was this girl's nature to make such an admission, and yet mean little more by it than a phrase of common thanks for some common courtesy? He was surely justified in taking her hand and catching it to his lips, after satisfying himself that nobody was looking on.

"Jane," he murmured, "no—Beltenebrosa—my Beltenebrosa! Let your heart plead for me, and let your lips answer as it prompts. I entreat you to accept, not this only, but all my worldly wealth—I ought to say worldly poverty—for I have little to offer beyond such devotion as no woman ever won, no woman on earth ever deserved, but yourself. I wonder at my presumption, too. You are fit to be a queen, and I ask you to share a humble home like mine!"

"Am I fit to be a queen?"

In the dark eyes came a soft and beautiful languor; it was pleasant to be so flattered, so adored—why should she not inhale the incense, and yield her senses to its sweet intoxication while she could?

With Jane Lee, the present seemed all-sufficient; there was that rare disposition—so capable of physical enjoyment—which seldom looks forward and never back.

"Oh Beltenebrosa!" continued the clergyman, "women are not blind. You must have seen how I love you. Have pity on me—if you take no thought for yourself—and say you will be my wife."

It was a regular proposal, such as would have come up to the exacting standard of little Miss Moffat herself, and could not have been more correctly advanced by a bishop. In a flash she took in the whole situation—the arguments for and against, the advantages and the drawbacks. That five hundred pounds weighed heavily in the balance. It was inconvenient to be wholly without money, particularly when one had no home. Yes, she would borrow his five hundred, and accept his offer. Marrying must be a future consideration; but there was something pleasant and creditable in being engaged. Miss Quilter, no doubt, would afford the sanction of her approval. The whole school would look at her with admiration, and she need never go back to the rectory in Somersetshire again.

"Do you want me to promise?" she asked, with such a bright smile as might have defeated a Dean and Chapter. "What would you like me to say?"

"That you will marry me, my darling, at once, and love

me all the days of your life," replied the curate, believing the heaven he had so often preached of was beginning to dawn for him on earth.

"If I take this money, you will feel as if you had bought me. Five hundred pounds! What James Paravant calls 'a monkey.' Poor James Paravant! And do you really think I am worth a monkey?"

He felt and looked hurt. How could she speak so lightly? and was it not simply cruel to remind him of his rival at such a time? Nothing would have induced him to swear; but secretly, no doubt, with regard to James Paravant, he relieved his feelings with some clerical equivalent for a curse.

"You are worth all this world to me," he answered, in a voice quivering with emotion. "Perhaps, for your sake, I am forfeiting my welfare in the next."

"You must be very fond of me!"

"I am not going to tell you so, over and over again. My darling, I love you so madly that it amounts to torture."

"And you want to cure yourself with the only certain remedy. Some day you will wake up recovered, and in your right mind. Then you will wish you hadn't, and say so."

"When I do, may my tongue rot out of my mouth! When I do, may I— But you know better. This is only to try me."

"Then I accept the money, and as for the other matter, I suppose I need say no more than"—

"The two things are wholly distinct," he interrupted. "Forgive me that, in my agitation, I have not kept them separate. Believe I may, I have been thoughtless, and in too great a hurry, but not wanting in delicacy of feeling. Such beauty as yours is enough to turn any man's head, were he ten times a priest!"

She laughed lightly; not the least like a girl of twenty, engaged for the first time.

"There is no accounting for tastes," said she. "I wonder what you can see to admire in my black face."

"Beltenebrosa!" he murmured, pressing to his heart the slender hand she slipped within his arm; for they had reached Victoria Gate now, and were passing out of Fairyland into Bayswater.

It is something, if for ever so short a walk, to have trod

the enchanted ground. Henceforth one is free of the guild, and, so to speak, a brother of the craft. Birds, and breeze, and running waters speak no longer in an unknown tongue. Those songs without words, those voices of the air that never pass the portals of material sense, tell us strange secrets, perhaps far better unrevealed, because of such learning comes suffering; and for Hope, with her illusions of pleasure, we have accepted Memory with her reality of pain.

There was a parable for all time in that tree of Paradise which bore the knowledge of good and evil as its fruit.

Hungry, reckless, and disobedient, the child of man must needs pluck and eat; and be disappointed, and never know peace, nor innocence, nor fulness of content again.

Who so happy as Mervyn Strange, walking towards the City, with head up, and long confident strides, to purchase in the cheapest mart such articles of haberdashery as he felt the occasion demanded, resolving the while certain arrangements required by our paternal laws before a man can call the most friendless of young ladies his own? He was dreaming a dream that bordered on ecstasy, and would have been unalloyed happiness, but for one consideration. How was he to stand excused before Mrs. Tregarthen, and in what words of penitence, what form of special pleading, should he deprecate the anger of that justly infuriated dame? He could not conceal from himself that the charges she would too surely bring against him were well-founded and difficult of refutation. He had most certainly committed a breach of trust. Was there not something like abduction in the taking of Jane Lee from her temporary home, and, under pretence of a funeral, hurrying her clandestinely into marriage? What would the weekly papers say—those censors of our morals, our manners, and our dress? He shuddered to think of some withering article, couched in editorial eloquence, and holding him up to public reprobation, as a clerk in holy orders enacting the part of leading villain in a dramatic history of love and law. But she was worth the risk, his beautiful Beltenebrosa—ay, were the risk a certainty, and the penalty ten thousand times as vile!

She too gave her mind to reflection, but hers was no simple maiden's dream of pure, unreasoning love; on the contrary, she was wide-awake, never more so, and looked her position in the face with calm, impartial eyes. No;

she *could* not bring herself to submit to the yoke. Freedom, freedom was the boon for which she longed; and, behold, it was already within her grasp. Five hundred pounds. Even her limited experience taught her it was but a small sum on which to begin the world. But the basis of her whole character was self-reliance; and she never doubted for a moment that, with her voice, her courage, and her personal attractions, she could make her own way, and climb unassisted to independence, even wealth.

"Poor fellow! he's dreadfully spooney," she reflected, with a pity not devoid of scorn; "and he will be wretched when he finds I've thrown him over; but it will console him to think I've taken his money, and, after a time, when I send it back—which I swear to do the day the executors pay up—he will have got over the worst, and be surprised to find it hasn't killed him after all. But I don't think he'll ever marry anybody else."

She must have had some intuitive knowledge of the male heart, apart from experience—natural, inborn, like the instinct which teaches her sex, while yet in short frocks, to nurse and dandle a doll.

It was easy enough to explain to Miss Quilter that her clothes required revision, as she could not afford a new fit-out; and the good lady saw no reason why Miss Lee's boxes should not accompany her in a four-wheeled cab for such thrifty purpose of repair. She was an early person herself, and thought the girl wise to start directly after breakfast, with a promise of returning to dinner, accompanied by Mr. Strange. He would be occupied all the morning too, and had arranged to meet her at Verey's, and take her—yes—take her to the Zoological after luncheon; there could be no harm in that!

"She's an affectionate creature, under her cold exterior," thought the schoolmistress; wondering that her visitor, usually sparing of caresses, should have embraced her so warmly at parting, with her dark eyes full of tears. "Poor dear! No father, no mother, no friends. It's a mercy this young clergyman has turned up to look after her and find her a home."

Mervyn Strange came back to dinner light of step and jaunty of demeanour, as became a successful swain.

"And what have you done with Jane?" was Miss Quilter's natural question, put with that heavy playfulness which people think appropriate to such frivolous occasions

as betrothals, marriages, and christenings. "I hope you haven't had a quarrel in the cab, and left her to walk!"

"Jane! Isn't she with *you*?"

"No. Isn't she with *you*?"

Then it came out she had left the house at half-past nine, and neither of them had set eyes on her since.

Book II

CHAPTER XIII

MR. DELAPRÉ

MISS LEE'S first impulse, when she found herself a free agent, with two boxes full of clothes on the roof of a four-wheeled cab, and five hundred pounds in her pocket, was to hurry into the country and fill her lungs with free air from heaven, under the greenwood tree. Such a fancy was, no doubt, tempting, but our young lady had already taught herself to act on reason, rather than instinct, and reflected that, to enjoy real liberty for man or woman, there is no place like London. Its crowds and labyrinths are alike favourable to concealment. There is a case on record, of a refractory husband who ran away from his wife, and lived twenty years in the next street, without detection by that ill-used and justly incensed lady. Like the Lovel of a touching ditty, still chanted in our nurseries as "The Mistletoe Bough," and with no better success—

Unceasing she sought him, and found him not!

"Where to, miss?" asked the cabman, banging the door after she got in.

"Marshall and Snelgrove's," answered the fare, as boldly as if she meant to buy a year's outfit; but long before she could arrive at that emporium, she bade him set her down near a cabstand, alleging that his cushions were dirty and smelt of gin. An extra shilling soothed his wounded spirit under such an accusation, and, choosing another vehicle, she simply told its driver to go on till ordered to stop, thus, like a Red Indian, "covering her trail." At a quarter of a mile she directed him to a railway station, where the luggage was taken out, and he was discharged. Hence, after an hour's waiting, she took

a fresh departure, satisfied that at last she had destroyed all traces by which she could be followed up. There was no difficulty in obtaining quiet lodgings in a narrow street off Long Acre, and by five o'clock Miss Lee, for the first time in her life, sat down to tea in a room of her own, as free, she told herself, with irrepressible exultation, as a bird on a bough.

I fear it modified her triumph very little to reflect on the consternation she left behind her in Bayswater and elsewhere. She laughed outright to realise Miss Quilter's puzzled face, and Mrs. Tregarthen's indignant frown. She wondered whether the rector missed her much, and how Paravant bore the absence of his idol. Then she thought of Mervyn Strange, looked in the glass over her chimney-piece, shook her head and smiled.

Fresh, cool, and so handsome, that her landlady, who was a tolerably respectable woman, regretted not having been more stringent as to references, Jane Lee emerged next morning, prepared to carry out certain plans, the result of many hours' consideration, finally brought to perfection during an elaborate toilet, after a good night's rest.

In the first place, having sent for a morning paper, and studied its advertisements at breakfast, she secured a neat, well-turned-out brougham, looking as like a private carriage as possible, not by the hour, nor the day, but the week. She might want it more than once, she reflected, to visit at the same places, and had already learned that the world is governed by appearances, graduated on its own *ad valorem* scale: the lady on foot—the lady in another person's carriage—the lady in her own. She made her bargain, therefore, with a wise liberality, stipulating that she should be drawn daily by the same horse, driven by the same man, the latter in top-boots, the former in brass-mounted harness, with ribbons at each ear. Getting into such an "equipage," as her landlady called it, faultlessly dressed, she seemed indeed, to use the words of that observer, "None of your make-believes, but a real lady born, as did credit to the lodgings and the street!"

"I believe I could act any part, in any station," thought Miss Lee, pulling the check-string in a shabby, tumble-down street. "It seems so easy to be a great lady, and to look like it, when the appliances are all to one's hand. I should get tired of the character too, I daresay, after a

time. Change, I think, is what I really love, and a spice of adventure. Something to brisk one up, and make one look out for oneself. No. I should *not* have been a good wife for a parson. Poor Mr. Strange! He was very fond of me. I hope he's got over it. No, I don't. I shouldn't like him not to care. Yes, that's the door. Goodness! how dirty, and what a funny little place!"

It was indeed more filthy than funny, in broad daylight, and, except to the initiated, looked anything in the world but a private entrance to one of the brightest little theatres in London. The cobbler in the *Arabian Nights*, who had been taken to a certain locality with a bandage over his eyes, could only make his way there a second time when blindfold again. How many haunts are there in our great puzzling city, that we find readily enough after dinner, but might seek for hours after luncheon in vain?

With some difficulty her driver detected a bell, hung so high as to defeat the impudence of those diminutive town-bred urchins, who would have asked no better fun than continually to ring it and run away. After some delay, it was answered by a stout, comely, well-set-up gentleman, dressed with the utmost splendour, wearing smiles on his good-looking face and a flower at his breast.

The incongruity of this person with his surroundings struck Jane Lee as so ludicrous that she lowered her veil to conceal a laugh.

"I beg your pardon," said she, from inside the carriage; "I have taken the liberty of calling, to know if I can see Mr. Delapré."

"Certainly, madam, certainly," with an elaborate bow and the utmost courtesy of manner. "I am Mr. Delapré —at your service. What can I do for you? Had you not better alight, and step in?"

"He must be used to pretty women in broughams," thought Jane Lee, rather disappointed that such an appearance as hers should create no more sensation. "He doesn't seem the least put out of his way. How he shines all over—teeth, boots, and especially his hat! I wonder whether he will be equally polite when I've told him my business, and he sees me into the carriage to go away!"

Thus speculating, she followed Mr. Delapré up one flight of stairs, and down another, into a dingy passage, cool with breaths from the outer air, till, stopping to open

"My visit is purely a matter of business"

a door with his pass-key, he made another profound bow, and motioned her to walk in.

"I wish I had a better room, madam," said he, "for the reception of so distinguished a visitor. But when ladies come to see an actor they must put up with an actor's accommodation. Pray be seated, and—and—may I offer you a glass of wine?"

Decanters stood on the table, and beautifully cut glasses, also fresh flowers, a photograph-book, a box of cigarettes, and a drawing in chalks, half-finished. There was a bad portrait of somebody as Richard the Third on the wall, surmounting a fencing-mask, leather jerkin, and pair of foils. Jane Lee, who had never seen nor pictured to herself such a chamber, so furnished, felt interested and amused.

Declining sherry at one o'clock in the day, she calmly took a seat and put her veil up. It was gratifying to observe that he seemed at least startled by the face thus disclosed.

"I called early on purpose," said his visitor, in the measured tone that harmonised so well with her calm, imperious beauty. "I was desirous to see you, and am fortunate to have found you at home."

"Pardon me," he interrupted, "the good fortune is mine. I would not have missed seeing *you* for more than I can say."

"My visit is purely a matter of business," she resumed, with increased dignity, "and is soon explained. I wish to obtain a professional engagement."

He had suspected it from the first, but felt a little disappointed nevertheless. It would have been such a romance, such a triumph, had this beautiful woman fallen in love with him from stalls or boxes, and driven here, brougham and all, to tell him so! These things never did happen, but that was no reason they never should. Oh! why was not life all melodrama, rather than comedy, farce, sometimes burlesque! Well, well, business must be attended to, and bread is a necessity of existence, though we can do without flowers.

"An engagement?" repeated Mr. Delapré, whose father's name was Dobbs. "You are aware, madam, that this is a serious matter, requiring consideration. You are not, I think, in the—in the profession. Excuse me, I see it at a glance. Have you any proposal to

make? Perhaps I had better hear what you have to say."

He had dropped the fine gentleman, and spoke in a business-like manner enough. She puzzled him. Her dress, her bearing, the neat quiet brougham, above all, its driver in his top-boots, inferred neither the flashy adventuress, nor the painstaking woman, toiling for a livelihood at so much a week. Jane Lee's worldly wisdom was already bearing fruit.

"Proposal?" she returned. "The proposal ought to come from the gentleman. Mr. Delapré, if I tell you my private history, it is of course in the strictest confidence, and must go no further."

He changed back to the fine gentleman—the stage fine gentleman—with marvellous versatility.

"Hear me swear"— he began.

"You needn't swear. It's unnecessary and profane. Your word is quite sufficient. The real truth is"—"now for a crammer," thought both speaker and listener—"the real truth is, that I—I am a married lady, and separated from my husband."

He drew his chair nearer, assuming an expression of sympathy, interest, and deep concern.

"I need not enter into all that," she continued. "Enough to say that we were unhappy together, and have agreed to live apart. Perhaps it is my fault, perhaps not."

He expressed in dumb show how impossible it was that she could be to blame. And his visitor proceeded calmly with her confidences:

"Incompatibility of temper, and an impracticable mother-in-law. Selfishness on one side, inexperience on the other. Ignorant, innocent, and married from the schoolroom. I had better have tied my skipping-rope round my neck and drawn it tight! But that's nothing to the purpose now."

He was watching her narrowly. If she would only act like this before the footlights, he might do worse than entertain her proposal.

"Excuse me," said he, "do I understand that you have thrown off your husband's control, and are a perfectly free agent?"

"Perfectly."

The command of countenance with which she con-

cealed a smile showed no small histrionic power. It imposed on Mr. Delapré, who began to think she might be telling the truth.

"May I ask your name? I beg pardon for being so unceremonious."

She had prepared herself for this very natural question, and bowed calmly while she answered—

"Certainly. It saves a deal of trouble. Mrs. Bell."

"And you really wish to go into the drudgery of our profession? With all its attractions, I am bound to warn you that it *is* a drudgery, particularly at first."

"I am not afraid of hard work. I like effort, mental or bodily. I am aware I must begin at the foot of the ladder, and persevere, step by step, till I reach the top."

"The progress is slow," he returned; "and, with all the perseverance in the world, most uncertain. But I own I love my calling, and would follow it if I had to sing in a chorus at twelve shillings a week."

This from a man with something like as many thousand pounds (borrowed money) sunk in theatrical property, seemed a high compliment to the profession.

"Twelve shillings a week," repeated Jane simply. "I suppose I should not earn more at first. I ought to tell you, Mr. Delapré, I have an independent fortune."

He stared, but tried not to look so astonished as he felt. This was altogether a new experience. Many young ladies, handsome and ordinary, had come to ask him for engagements, but none till to-day in a private carriage, professing a noble disregard for salary.

"Mrs. Bell," he replied, with much cordiality, "I am most anxious to meet your views. I will see what can be done. Kindly favour me with another call — say to-morrow, at the same hour. I shall hope to make you such an offer as you may think it worth while to entertain."

Then he attended her to the carriage, with as much deference as if she had been a duchess, and stood at his door, bare-headed, while she drove away.

CHAPTER XIV

AN EXPLANATION

THE well-appointed brougham might now be seen very often turning into Whynot Street, or waiting at the shabby entrance to the Nonsuch Theatre. Its manager and Mrs. Bell were playing a game of cross-purposes. Each wanted to force the other's hand, both to conceal their own. Mr. Delapré was mystified. He could learn nothing about his beautiful acquaintance but what she chose to tell him, and, notwithstanding his knowledge of the world — his own world be it understood, lively, but limited—felt he was at a disadvantage.

The lady's appearance, he opined, would draw full houses; nor could he conceal from himself that she was gifted with those talents which, properly cultivated and brought out, constitute an actress. He heard her sing without accompaniment, and found it difficult to judge the performance impartially, so ingratiating was the manner of the performer. Her voice, though it would scarcely fill a concert-room, much less a theatre, seemed perfectly under command, and lent itself so easily to the meaning, rather than the words of her song, that a listener could not but imagine he was taking part in it himself. He prevailed on her to read aloud from Ophelia and Lady Teazle. She was neither too pathetic in the one nor too flippant in the other, while to her eyes came dreamy madness and sparkling satire at will. He proposed that she should take off her bonnet, and let her long black hair stream over her shoulders, for Lady Macbeth, in the sleep-walking scene; but she cut him short with a quiet refusal to make any alteration in her toilet; remarking that a woman should be forty at least, and stout in proportion, for the part of so energetic a housewife, particularly when she gives the henpecked Thane a piece of her mind.

Yes, it was on the cards that Mrs. Bell might be an extraordinary success. Strange to say, this flattering possibility caused the manager much hesitation and perplexity.

Mr. Delapré was a good fellow enough; open-handed in money-matters, hospitable, well-conditioned, and, if fond of pleasure, liking to share it with his friends. But he was also a vain man; in matters of personal advantage, an egotist to the core. Handsome, versatile, essentially *débonnaire*, he always played the ladies' parts on his own boards, and was unwilling to share, even with the other sex, that applause which it is only fair to say was freely accorded by an enthusiastic audience.

He had climbed the ladder too fast, and been spoiled by success. The height turns a man giddy at thirty, that, twenty years later, only makes him careful not to fall.

Now, if Mrs. Bell should take the town by storm, even though brought out under his auspices, he would no longer be first fiddle in his own band. No money could repay him for the loss of that position. On the other hand, if he afforded her a fair start and she failed, the interests of the theatre must necessarily suffer by her incapacity. Besides, there were jealousies enough in the company already. In what company are there not? More than one actress of long standing was quite capable of making his dictatorship exceedingly troublesome, if she suspected her own claims were overlooked. No man in his senses voluntarily lays himself open to the attacks of a woman's spite, a woman's tongue, and a woman's wit. These weapons, sharpened by a sense of injury, and wielded by the long experience of an actress, can penetrate the toughest hide, and would pierce a rhinoceros to the quick. In the green-room, as in the Cabinet, individual dissatisfactions create a difficulty at every turn, and he who would drive either coach to its destination requires to study and humour the various tempers of his team.

So long, too, as his relations with this beautiful acquaintance took no definite shape, they seemed flavoured with a spice of romantic mystery, exceedingly flattering to his self-love. He liked the company to gossip and speculate, carrying tales from one to another of his adventures, his *bonnes fortunes*, his pre-eminence in a refined profligacy. Perhaps, in the whole range of dramatic character he most admired Don Giovanni;

and largely valuing his own reputation as a lady-killer, enjoyed with no little zest such a conversation as the following, held on a terrace at Richmond, overlooking the river.

Said Mrs. Trevelyan of the Excelsior Theatre to Miss Mountcharles of his own—

"Is it announced, Fanny? I think at last we may venture to congratulate him."

"The pitcher has been to the well so often!" replied Fanny, with the shrug of her pretty shoulders that was her telling point. "If it's broke at last, and you will send him a wedding-present, so will I."

"What do you mean, fair ladies?" said the manager, inexpressibly gratified. "You speak dark sentences, like witches, as you are."

"Mayn't we congratulate you?" asked Miss Mountcharles.

"And condole with the others—the *mille è trè?* Poor things, I'm sorry for them!" added Mrs. Trevelyan, a married woman separated from her husband, and therefore entitled to commiserate.

"Upon my life, you're too hard on me," said Mr. Delapré. "Do I *look* like a marrying man? I appeal to Mrs. Trevelyan."

"Frankly, you do *not!*" replied that lady, with a laugh. "But it's too bad of you, all the same. You asked her to sit on the box. You took her out in a boat. She thinks you made the party on purpose for her, and no wonder. If you don't propose this evening, going home, you are simply a villain with a smiling cheek, a traitor of the deepest dye, and all the rest of it. Men are so heartless!"

"She wouldn't accept me," he answered, with infinite coxcombry.

"Wouldn't she!" murmured Miss Mountcharles. "I wonder what she expects?"

"She would make a capital Donna Anna," whispered the other in her friend's ear. "I wish he mayn't have asked her to study the part. Hush! Here she comes."

Mrs. Bell, walking along the terrace to join them, seemed as little like a broken-hearted damsel as possible.

"Donna Anna may have been as dark," thought Mr. Delapré, "but I doubt if she was half as handsome; and if she had carried so fine a figure or so light a step, I think she would never have been forsaken."

Then he asked her whether he had not better hurry dinner, and treated her so entirely as queen of the revels, that the company, looking meaningly in each other's faces, voted their volatile manager "settled at last!"

Now, this Richmond party was the result of reflection, and so to speak, strategy, on the part both of lady and gentleman. Jane Lee, or Mrs. Bell, as she chose to call herself, perhaps not without kindly remembrance of him who had given his evil destiny the name of Beltenebrosa, soon found that the mere keeping up of appearances as a fine lady melted money fast, even in a lodging near Long Acre. The brougham and its well-dressed coachman alone ran away with ten guineas a week. Rich attire cannot be worn for nothing, and she had been tempted to purchase so much jewellery as made a terrific hole in her capital. The time had not arrived for payment of her legacy, and when it did come, she was determined to return every shilling to Mervyn Strange, though she should have to sweep a crossing for her daily bread! At far too short a distance she could already see the end of her resources, and still her acquaintance with Mr. Delapré afforded nothing more substantial than high-flown compliments, and promises that bore no fruit. They must come to an understanding, and she resolved to tell him so at the first opportunity. This could hardly be done, however, on the box-seat of a coach, not to mention the proximity of those genial spirits who crowded its roof; the manager's whole attention was necessarily absorbed in the guidance of his team.

To sit behind four horses (a very different thing from *driving* them), with only as many fingers for the same number of reins, and a whip in hand, of which the thong is inconveniently light and long, seems the correct thing for fast gentlemen to do.

Mr. Delapré, who aspired to the character of a man of fashion—which he could not be—rather than a man of talent—which he was—felt no scruple in risking the lives of half a dozen ornaments of the British drama up-and-down-hill over Wimbledon Common, with a scratch team, unsound and insubordinate, all pulling different ways at once. It was more by good luck than skilful driving that coach and freight ever arrived at the Castle Hotel, Richmond, to stop and set down, ignominiously, *outside* its covered porch.

Some of the passengers did not know their danger, others braced their nerves with champagne; all looked forward to the return journey, after an early dinner, with more confidence than might have been supposed.

In the meantime, Mr. Delapré, who handled the reins and gave the entertainment, was an object of interest and admiration to his guests. The ladies especially, with hearts softening under the influence of roses, sunshine, and cooling drinks, felt he was more fascinating than ever, and wondered how that pale woman by his side, who accepted his attentions with the utmost indifference, could look so calm and cold.

"Handsome, my dear! Not a bit of it! Too tall by a foot!" whispered little Miss Lightfoot, who excelled in the dance, to Madame Shenck, a full-blown blonde, with no talent in particular but that of looking well in all costumes. "Too dark for my taste," replied madame, in remarkably good English, "and no colouring whatever"; while Miss Mountcharles told her next neighbour that the manager's last flame looked as yellow as a guinea, and Mrs. Trevelyan vowed she was as pale as a ghost!

He continued to make strong running nevertheless, contriving after dinner, when they all went for a stroll in Richmond Park, to detach Mrs. Bell from the rest, and walk away with her, as Miss Lightfoot observed, "all amongst the deer, and the oaks, and the ferns, as if they were regularly engaged!"

Beltenebrosa was in her element. Like some woodland nymph, she seemed to absorb strength and energy from the sylvan scene, and looked more beautiful than ever, while she moved light and stately through flickering gleams and shadows, under the greenwood tree. His artistic perceptions could not but be roused to admiration, and with an intense consciousness of self-approval, he reflected on the increase of fame he must have gained in his own circle by discovering this queenly creature, and keeping her as yet so successfully to himself.

He was only waiting an opportunity to tell her something pleasant and indefinite to that effect, but they had not walked two hundred yards before she stopped short, and turned full upon him, with the following pertinent appeal:—

I wanted to see you alone, Mr. Delapré—that is why I consented to this solitary expedition. You and I must

come to an understanding, without any more shilly-shally-ing—now—once for all!"

The tone was abrupt, the manner peremptory. Under such unfavourable conditions even Mr. Delapré could not make love to advantage.

"We have often been alone before, Mrs. Bell," he answered courteously, "but never in so sweet a spot. Forgive me if I hint that such a scene is more appropriate to pleasure than business."

"You know the proverb," she replied; "one must always come before the other, Mr. Delapré. I will be frank with you." He bowed, and made an attempt to take her hand, which was not successful. "I am at the end of my resources. The first time we met I told you I had an independent fortune. Since then circumstances have altered. I must now endeavour to make my own way in the world. You have often hinted at an engagement, but put me off from day to day. I cannot live on promises."

"No more can I!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Mrs. Bell, shall we make a bargain?"

His whole manner had changed, and it roused her indignation to feel that an admission of poverty lowered her in his esteem.

"The man is not a gentleman," she said to herself, "I never quite thought he was"; but she only observed aloud, "There must be two parties to every bargain. Let me hear what you have to propose."

Something in her manner checked while it attracted him. He wondered and was provoked at his own nervousness. What was this woman more than other women that his lip should shake and his heart fail him to woo her like the rest? Courage, man! They were all the same—at least in the drama—and to be won by a *coup de main!*

He floundered and hesitated.

"I will do anything to—to meet your wishes, if, on your part, you—you will try to meet mine. Oh, Mrs. Bell, it would break my heart to think I was never to see you again. We are together too seldom as it is. If—if you would confide your future to my keeping, I would do everything in the power of man to make it a happy one. Were you unmarried I could speak plainer; but, after all, what are marriages like yours? Mere conventional forms. Do not let us waste our time in discussing such lamentable superstitions."

She understood him perfectly, and where another woman would have been frightened or irritated, felt only some amusement and much contempt.

"Suppose I am free?" she said, with rather a bitter smile. "Suppose I have been divorced, or never married at all?"

He laughed uncomfortably. "In that case," said he, "I could only wish I were a marrying man myself. But, believe me, Mrs. Bell, those are the most lasting attachments that depend wholly and solely on the heart. You won mine from the first. If you think it worth keeping you have only to say so."

"That is not the engagement I asked for," she answered, with such scorn in her dark eyes as caused him to lower his own.

He had lost his temper and was losing his head.

"A bargain is a bargain," said he rudely. "You understand my terms. Take them or leave them."

Jane Lee was proud of her self-control; nevertheless, had she been a man, she would have knocked him down then and there. She bit her lip instead, turning a shade paler than before.

"After this, Mr. Delapré," said she, "you and I must be strangers. Do not think because I am a woman I cannot take my own part and resent an injury. I shall not return to London on your coach. No, nor even walk back with you to the Castle. Make what excuses you choose to your guests. I conclude you will prefer any falsehood to a confession that you have grossly insulted the only defenceless lady of your party!"

He protested, pleaded, apologised, to no purpose. Angry and crestfallen, he returned alone to his guests, putting the best face he could on the absence of his companion, who calmly continued her walk on and on through the remotest solitudes of Richmond Park, rather pleased than otherwise with the excitement of a skirmish in which she had so entirely the advantage.

CHAPTER XV

"A LITTLE LESS THAN KIN—"

WHILE the "three-cornered team," as an old ostler called it, was putting to, while actors and actresses, who were bound to be home in time for a performance that commenced at eight p.m., were discussing the merits of the entertainment, the peculiarities of their host, and above all, the unaccountable absence of Mrs. Bell, who, it appeared, was not to accompany them back to London, that lady sauntered pleasantly through the ferns among the oaks and the deer, enjoying the delights of this beautiful wilderness the more leisurely, that she determined not to return to the hotel till Mr. Delapré and his party were fairly off. Her perfect health and truly shaped frame hardly knew the meaning of fatigue, and it was with no sense of lassitude, but only in a delightful consciousness of freedom from the trammels and decorum of conventional life, that she flung herself down among the ferns, and watched a herd of fallow-deer crossing a sunny glade in single file, whisking an ear, stamping a foot, or cropping the tender herbage as they passed. Suddenly, quick as thought, the careless, pacing walk changed to a startled scurry, and they scoured off at speed to disappear behind the nearest thicket, while Jane Lee, conscious of a shadow between her and the light, sprang to her feet with a quickened pulse, and the sense of irritation that waits on fear. A man's voice, harsh and guttural, broke the sylvan silence with a mild request, that only its dictatorial tone magnified to a threat.

"You ain't a-got such a thing as a 'arf-pint about you, marm?"

The speaker was a slender, shapely, good-looking fellow enough; very dark, very dirty, with beautiful teeth, and a most unpleasant smile. He wore earrings and a red neck-handkerchief. The rest of his attire was in rags,

while feet without stockings peeped through the rents in his clumsy boots. A less desirable companion to walk with through a lonely wood could hardly have been found on a summer's day. And for a few startled moments the well-dressed lady thus accosted wished herself back on Mr. Delapré's coach, wandering leaders, kicking wheelers, and all. She had plenty of courage, and soon recovered herself.

"Half a pint!" she repeated. "I suppose you mean beer. How can I carry beer about with me? Do you think I keep it in a smelling-bottle? Go on, my good man, and don't waste your time talking nonsense. I should say you've had beer enough already."

"I ain't a good man," he answered sulkily, though somewhat cowed to find his presence created so little dismay. "And I ain't a-had beer enuff a'ready. No, nor yet 'arf enuff—there! You've a-got the price of a pint about you somewheres. Come, hand it out!"

She would willingly have paid for a pint, or even a gallon, to be quit of him, but reflected that, to get at her silver, she must produce a little *porte-monnaie* containing all the remnant of her store, and thus offer an inducement to robbery with violence on the spot. In one rapid glance she satisfied herself no assistance was at hand; in another, she scanned the tramp's slight, small-boned figure, and calculated that if it came to a trial of strength, she might be able to hold her own.

"You'll get nothing from *me*," she said firmly. "Come, my man, it's no use. Drop it, and walk on!"

"Walk on?" he replied; "yes, I'll walk on along o' you. It's not such a honner w'en all's said and done! Wot, you won't, won't ye? Then I'll just make ye!"

Oh for the gleam of a park-keeper's shiny hat! Not a living creature was in sight, not so much as a fawn or a rabbit, only the birds sang joyously in the dark depths of woodland; and the broad palmated ferns grew high enough to screen any lawless deed of outrage or rapine.

He took her by the wrist in a grip of steel, scarcely to be expected from those taper fingers; but her blood was up, and she made her white teeth meet in the brown dirty hand. He wrenched himself free, drew a clasp-knife from his pocket, and opened it with a frightful curse.

Her courage failed her now; she believed her hour was come, and put both hands up to screen her eyes, entreating

him to spare her life—only spare her life—and take all she had!

Instead of committing murder then and there, he shut up his knife and stared in her face with unfeigned surprise, muttering broken sentences in some outlandish tongue she had never heard before. By degrees he seemed to recover his composure, and presently burst into a hearty laugh.

"You ain't got no Romany," said he, "not a word—not even a morsel of patter; but you're one of *us!* I ought to have spotted you at first. I might have knowed it without seeing of it marked in your skin. Only a Purrum or a Kaulo-Camlo could be so black and so comely. Ah! the Gorgios may bluff and bounce, but their women can't hold a candle to the Lovels and the Lees. Yes, yes; there you stands, my sister! A true thorough-bred Romany! And to think I've been a-looking for you nigh fifteen years, and found you without a candle at last!"

"Your sister!" she gasped; "and you've been looking for me! What do you mean?"

He laid his slender finger—tawny, unwashed, yet so like her own—on the arm that her struggles had bared to its elbow, and pointed out the tiny blue initials, to which she was so accustomed she hardly knew they were there.

"See here," said he. "Ever since I was a child of five, I have been taught to look for a woman who carries that mark on her wrist, and bring her back to her kindred and her tribe. I am a Lee, and so are you; but it's no matter for that. When Shuri Lee left the camp, she carried a baby with her, marked as you are now. She never came back. I was but a little lad, and yet I remember how Fighting Jack took on. He hadn't been married long enough to make it easy for him, poor old chap! Ah! it would be different now, maybe; but his hair might never have turned so white, if he hadn't lost both wife and child all in one go! Well, we've been a-seeking the babe ever since, us Lees, the whole of the tribe. Look ye here. J. L., that's Jericho Lee. I'm marked too, same as yourself. We ought to be pairs!"

She turned giddy, and for a moment faint. The old oaks seemed to reel and stagger all round. Then came the strange reaction that follows every startling experience, the unaccountable sense that it is neither so new nor so extraordinary, nor so overpowering as it ought to be.

That in some state of existence, something of the same nature has occurred to us before, that we are a little disappointed, and that, however wonderful the revelation, we had expected more.

"Do you mean you know me?" she asked, trying to speak calmly. "Do you remember my mother? What was she? Who am I? Tell me all you can."

"You are a true Romany," was his answer. "What the Gentiles call a Gipsy, and so am I. We have a proverb: 'A Romany never lies to a Romany, nor speaks truth to a Gorgio.' You may believe what I tell you."

"You asked for beer just now," she said, putting her hand in her pocket, with some vague idea this new acquaintance ought to be humoured and conciliated.

"Not from *you!*—not from *you!*" he repeated, earnestly enough to betray the strength of a temptation he thus overcame. "Gipsies take no toll of each other. I am in rags while you are in satins, but perhaps I could show money against you now."

With that he pulled a handful of gold and silver from his pocket, and bade her "take what she would, the Lees were always ready to befriend each other."

Such an offer could not but inspire confidence. Beltenebrosa felt all her courage had come back, while her curiosity was keenly stimulated by this strange adventure.

"Where were you going when you found me here?" she asked. "Do your people make a practice of robbing every unprotected woman they find in a lonely spot?"

"I was going to our camp," he answered, ignoring the last part of her question. "It is not an hour's walk from this place. Come and see the gipsies in their home. We will give you a sister's welcome."

She hesitated. It would not be dark for hours. The days were surely past for kidnapping grown-up people, and the temptation was strong to study in their own haunts the race with which she had always felt so unaccountable a sympathy, to which she began to think she might be near akin.

"I will come and pay you a visit," she replied loftily. "No, do not fall behind. I am never ashamed of my company; and I want you to tell me all about your people and your tribe."

So this strangely matched pair walked on through Richmond Park, in the golden glows of the summer after-

noon; and by the way each imparted to the other such details of their respective lives as roused a keen interest in both. Jericho, inheriting from his Southern ancestors many refined instincts common to the Arab, the Gipsy, the Red-Indian, and the Patrician of Western Europe, felt strangely fascinated by this being of a superior order, who was yet a kinswoman, and belonged to his own race. He had never seen anyone so beautiful, and of a beauty, moreover, to which his eye and taste were trained. Dark brows and locks, white teeth, and delicate features were common enough amongst the women of his tribe, but never till to-day had he looked on gipsy charms enhanced by civilised culture and rich attire.

Let poets say what they will, beauty unadorned can never hold its own with beauty owing its dressmaker a bill that "carries over" three figures to the other side.

Jane Lee, too, scanned, not without a certain contemptuous approval, the agile form and dark expressive face of the youth who had so frightened her at their first acquaintance. While he talked on—teaching her their passwords, and affording much curious information on the peculiarities of the Romanies, as she must now learn to call her kindred—she could hardly believe this pleasant, well-spoken, imaginative companion was the same man who had seemed to her an hour back but an ill-conditioned tramp, thirsting for the vulgar gratification of beer.

"You know a great many things," she observed, with condescending surprise, not lost on the keen-witted gipsy; "why, where did you go to school?"

His dark eyes sparkled, and his smile showed a handsome set of teeth; but there was something of dignity in the carriage of his head and the wave of his arm while he replied—

"Look round, my sister, as far as your eye can see, as far as your thought can fly; you cannot even then compass the teaching of a school the Romany goes to day by day, all day long, and all night too. He learns to read in the blue sky above, to write on the wide earth below, and to calculate in the number of fools he gets a living out of at every village fair. Yes; the Romany never leaves school like the Gentile. I myself have to-day got the lesson by heart I have been learning all my life. See, there is the smoke rising from our kettles; welcome, my sister, to your own people and your real home!"

CHAPTER XVI

"A LITTLE MORE THAN KIND"

JANE LEE started back at a sound like thunder, which proved to be nothing more than an up-train on the London and South-Western Railway, passing directly overhead. Sheltered by one of its most imposing viaducts, the gipsies had taken up their quarters for the night. Savoury odours rose from a score of kettles, and slender wreaths of smoke, escaping into the air, attested that they extracted from the smallest supply of fuel the largest amount of fire. In the whole encampment there was but one caravan—a wooden structure like a Noah's Ark on wheels. The other dwellings consisted of rough sticks and tattered blankets, arranged with such skill as to form picturesque and tolerably comfortable tents. The gipsy, like the Chinese, holds in respect the wisdom of his ancestors, and, in his mechanical contrivances, refuses to depart from customs handed down through a hundred generations. He affects a residence to-day, on an English heath or common, of the same shape and texture as that which served his forefathers under the Shepherd Kings by the fluctuating waters of the Nile.

Picking her way through charred sticks, broken pans, bundles of rags, and dirty children, Jane Lee followed her guide to the caravan mentioned above, at the door of which, up three wooden steps, on a rush-bottomed chair without a back, sat its proprietor, taking the refreshments of evening air, and strong tobacco out of a short pipe, in alternate whiffs.

This personage was so remarkable in appearance as to merit description. He seemed long past the prime of life, but tough and vigorous still, standing about five feet nine in height, on a pair of legs and haunches fit to carry a Colossus. His shoulders looked narrow, but his girth of chest was deceptive and enormous. His neck was short,

and very thick, his jaw large, firm, and somewhat underhung, which gave his face the resolute yet honest expression of a mastiff. He had long muscular arms, tapering to a round wrist, and small thick hand, with knuckles less than usually prominent. This member, which it seems more natural to call "a fist," looked capable of inflicting the severest punishment without receiving injury.

Fighting Jack, indeed, had been in his day a terror to the London prize-ring, and one of the hardest hitters on record. Even now, though more than fifty years of age, after a rough life, and much sorrow, with much drink to drown it in, he liked to boast that, "though he warn't quite so handy on his pins, nor yet so saucy with his return as he used to be, it took a fairish good man to stand up to him still!"

With all his ruggedness of feature, there was something picturesque in his appearance, that impressed Jane Lee not unfavourably. He seemed more like the chief of a warlike desert tribe than the head of such a gang as this, tinkering saucepans for trade, and robbing hen-roosts for spoil.

Without betraying the slightest surprise at her approach, he bent on her a piercing look from under the black brows that so contrasted with his snow-white hair.

"Don't you go for to speak to him till he speaks to you," whispered Jericho. "There's one thing he can't a-bear, and that's a woman's tongue."

But Jane Lee was not to be intimidated. Walking boldly to the wooden steps that fenced his throne, she looked him full in the face, and asked—

"Are you the master here? I've come to see your people, and expect you to show me round the camp."

He was fairly staggered, testifying his emotion by smoking in shorter and fiercer puffs than before, while he turned wrathfully from the young lady to her guide.

"What's up now?" he demanded. "Who the —— is this, brother? And why the —— have you brought her to *me*?"

"I have found her at last, uncle," replied the younger gipsy respectfully. "Show him the marks, sister. Speak up, and say how Jericho was after you all these years, and brought you home at last."

Fighting Jack trembled from head to foot; the pipe shook between his broad, strong teeth. He came tottering

down the steps, and took the young lady by the hand, swaying to and fro like a man in drink.

"Tell me the truth," he growled fiercely, while he loosed the spotted kerchief round his thick brown throat. "Look ye here, you dursn't lie to me, neither of ye. I'd do for you both, as sure as you stand there alive!"

"It's no lie, uncle," pleaded Jericho, trembling like a leaf. "Show him your arm, sister, and have done with it."

Turning back the sleeve of her dress, she pushed down a costly bracelet that girt it, and stretched her full white arm for inspection. Fighting Jack stared and gasped, without a word. Then he turned his head away, and put the ends of his dirty neckcloth to his eyes.

Presently he looked kindly in her face. "You're welcome, my dear," said he; "you'll stay here to-night—in the old man's crib, you understand. Oh, you *must!* You shall have the best of everything—linen sheets, and black tea four shillings a pound—gold, my dear, if you'd eat it. Turn your face this way. Ah! you're like your mother, you always was! I'll go in and get ready. I won't be a minute. Don't you stir a finger, I'll be back directly."

Then he mounted the steps, and disappeared through his wooden door, like the cuckoo in a cuckoo-clock.

Fighting Jack was no exemplary character, far from it, not even a decently respectable member of society, but he possessed some redeeming qualities, of which not the least extenuating was a constant heart, that could love one woman in a lifetime, and be very tender for helplessness of any kind, particularly in a child. Whether this unreasoning and protective fidelity, like that of a mastiff or bulldog, may or may not have some affinity to the combative instinct, also common to these animals, that refuses to acknowledge defeat, I am scarcely physiologist enough to determine, though, in my own experience, I can call to mind more than one example of such heroes, only half brutalised by their heroism, whose courage sometimes sank to ferocity, but whose kindliness more often rose to the highest pitch of generosity and self-sacrifice. Fighting Jack married a woman he loved very dearly. It was the great pleasure of his life to deck her out in the gaudiest of clothing, the costliest of ornaments. The gipsy's wife, he liked to boast, could wear as heavy jewellery as the squire's lady, paid for, too, every carat of it, with her husband's

money. He knew no better, poor fellow! He thought a woman preferred dress and decoration to everything else on earth, and he would have given—he did give—his very life-blood to indulge her with what she liked. The mending of kettles and making of rush-bottom chairs are not lucrative branches of industry, even when supplemented by petty larceny in the matter of linen and fowls, but in the company he affected, Jack Lee soon found that his fists would gain him a profit he could never hope to earn with his fingers, and that a first-class boxer might afford to dress "his missus"—for that was his ambition—no less extravagantly than a lord of the land. So he went into training, fought his maiden fight triumphantly, finished up his man in thirteen rounds, and pocketed a clear fifty pounds with hardly a scratch. Proud and happy was the winner when he chucked the battle-money, every shilling of it, into his wife's lap; prouder and happier still when she burst out crying, and entreated him, with her arms round his neck, never, no never, to run such a risk for her sake again! Not that she cared for him as he did for her—the true secret, perhaps, of his infatuation; but what woman could remain unmoved by so touching a display of daring and devotion, particularly when thus crowned with success?

Then his backers discovered he could take punishment, to use their own expression, "like a glutton," so they matched him with a celebrity on whom the talent laid three to two, as having a stone the best of the weights, and being hitherto unvanquished. The fight created extraordinary interest, and was attended by many people who would have been sorry to see their names in print. The "dark one," as the sporting papers observed, wore his adversary down by dogged courage, correct fighting, and superior condition; leaving the ring sadly mauled, indeed, and almost blind, but once more a winner, after an hour and three-quarters. Again to quote from the sporting papers: "Ding-dong, hammer and tongs! A fair, old-fashioned, stand-up fight, and a splendid exhibition of true English pluck"; which last encomium, as the conqueror was a gipsy and the conquered a Jew, must be accepted for what it is worth.

So Fighting Jack became a celebrity also, and it was soon time "to put the strings on," and make a profit "the other way up," by a certain dishonest arrangement that

losers call a cross. His patrons trained him, therefore, to enter the ring for another contest, giving him strict injunctions at the last moment, and one hundred incontrovertible reasons, to sell the fight. He earned his money fairly, though much against the grain, laying himself open to the severest punishment, and doing his duty, as he understood it, with a loyal turpitude that sprang from a warped sense of honesty and gratitude to his knavish employers.

> His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
> And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.

His wife might have worn satins and velvets at a guinea a yard after that, but Jack never more faced his man in a roped ring; for within six weeks of this last disgraceful performance, the execution took place at which she lost her baby and her life. It was months—years—before the prize-fighter could hold his head up again.

To use his own words: "He got it so heavily he couldn't come to time!"

The man's heart was a large one, and perhaps, though ashamed of his weakness, and never admitting it but in his cups, he felt pain in that region more keenly than would many a sufferer of weaker fibre and less resolute will. That metaphor is old and well-worn, but apposite nevertheless, which describes the oak as rent and shattered by a gale, while the sapling stoops and bends to rise again unhurt.

Fighting Jack was a blackguard, no doubt; but not a bad specimen of his class — frank, daring, with many characteristic opinions, sufficiently primitive, and a strong determination to have his own way. This quality he demonstrated on the spot.

"Yes, you must share the old man's crib," he repeated, descending his wooden steps, after a brief absence within the caravan; "and the old man's supper, too, my pretty lady. Ah! I can't hardly bring my tongue to call you daughter. Now, who'd have thought it? Blessed if I don't begin to judge as it isn't all happy-go-lucky, heads-and-tails, just as the numbers come up! Well, nothing was too good for your mother, my dear, and there's nothing here in the camp, nor out of it neither, that shall be too good for you!"

He would take no denial. It seemed to him only natural that he should be obeyed. With a certain courtly

hospitality that belonged to his gipsy descent rather than his pugilistic education, he ushered Jane Lee into his dwelling, giving her a hearty but respectful welcome, and bidding her, so long as it suited her convenience, to consider this wooden house her home. The sun had already set, the protracted twilight of an English summer's day was glimmering into darkness. How was she to get back to London, even if she knew the way, and where else could she find shelter; supposing, and this seemed most unlikely, that the gipsies would permit her to leave their camp? She must make a virtue of necessity and remain here all night. It seemed no such hardship. On the contrary, perhaps from hereditary instinct, perhaps from feminine curiosity, the girl felt interested in her surroundings, and anxious to become more familiar with a wandering life that seemed the very ideal of that freedom for which she had often longed. Jericho, too, was a new experience. How could he be so ragged, so dirty, yet look so like a gentleman? Why did he move so gracefully, yet speak such vulgar English? And what was this secret influence that in the twinkling of an eye had elicited a romantic and mysterious character from a mere low-lived tramp asking for beer?

Fighting Jack, naturally enough, puzzled and impressed her exceedingly. Altogether, Jane Lee found so much to think of, that when Jericho brought her supper to the top of the wooden steps she couldn't eat a morsel. The repast was no less anomalous than the mode in which it was served. He handed her a silver drinking-cup and a wooden platter. On the one smoked a savoury stew, in the other bubbled Devonshire cider, cooled in a spring and sparkling like champagne. A clasp-knife and spoon of horn were flanked by a silver fork without crest or cipher, a table-napkin of fine linen lay neatly folded for her use, and the salt-cellar consisted of a hideous saucer, cracked to the rim and clumsily mended, but which any fancier of old china would gladly have purchased at its weight in gold.

Looking round, the furniture of the little hut seemed equally incongruous. There were silken hangings inside the door, and a velvet curtain at the narrow window. There was even a diminutive dressing-glass, and an attempt at a toilet-table, supplied with a tin basin, a paper of pins, and a tortoiseshell comb. "No brushes," thought Jane, with comical dismay, "and no soap!" In a recess

stood the bed, a wooden contrivance much too frail to carry Fighting Jack, and that seemed, moreover, not in the best repair. It boasted, however, linen sheets, perfectly clean and dry, a pillow with a lace edging, resewn at the corner where it had once been marked, and a patchwork quilt of the brightest colours, rather dirty, but soft, warm, and comfortable enough.

Presently a knock at his own door announced a visit from the proprietor, and Fighting Jack, still smoking, looked in with a radiant smile.

"Make yourself at home, my pretty," said he, hiding his pipe in the palm of his hand. "Where *would* you be at home, I should like to know, if it warn't here? Liberty Hall, this is, for you leastways. Feed, fill, and call for more. Why, you haven't eaten scarcely a scrap, nor drank scarcely a drop! My service to you, my dear, and a hearty welcome!"

He put the silver mug to his lips—obviously from politeness, for he set it down again little emptier than before, while the girl thanked him for his care, and assured him that her supper was all she could desire. He listened, with a sad, wistful look on his stern old face, and pondered silently, without moving an eyelash, for some seconds after she had done speaking.

"It's her voice," he said, with a little catch of his breath; "it's her very words, and the pretty trick she had with her hand. Let me call you daughter, my dear, and kiss you on the forehead this once, for I never thought to see the like of my Shuri above-ground again!"

She bent her cool white brow to meet his lips, and the old prize-fighter kissed it reverently, religiously, as devotees kiss the relics of a saint.

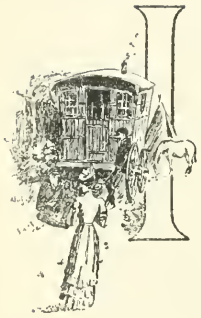
He was back half a lifetime, in the prime of his strength and manhood, happy in the one ennobling influence that had raised him to a thinking being from a mere courageous beast. For one moment it flashed across him that he might have made a better use of his chances; that if he had taken up some respectable trade, and worked at it steadily, he should now be able to offer this noble creature a worthier home; the next, his knowledge of human nature, acquired in all classes of society, as seen at their worst, suggested that she might have been more estranged from the humble mechanic than the daring, adventurous gipsy; and he smiled grimly to reflect that, with all its evil, no

woman could listen unmoved to the recital of such a life as his!

"I won't intrude on you no longer, my dear," said he, after a pause, in which he stared at her with steady, unconcealed admiration. "Oh, I haven't forgotten my manners, nor her as larnt me! You get ready for bed, my dear. I'll send in Nance—a handy lass she is, and a Lovel, but she couldn't hold a candle to you. Ah! show me one of them that can—Kaulo-Camlos, Petulengros, Hearnes, Marshalls, and Stanleys—one down, t'other come on. She shall make you a cup of tea—my Shuri always relished her tea—and you lie down, my dear, it'll do you good. If you feel strange or lonesome, sing out, and I'll answer as true as a clock. I won't be far off. I've laid my blanket and plenty more 'baccy under the steps. And—and—look ye here, my lass, if you've got such a thing as a bit of a prayer in your mind, give it mouth. I can't think of one myself. I haven't offered to say mine for nigh upon twenty years!"

CHAPTER XVII

ONE OF THE FAMILY



I HAVE an old friend who professes strong objections to staying with some relatives, on the ground that they treat him "like one of the family." In his case, he protests this unceremonious welcome means second-class fare and second-growth claret. In my own experience I have sometimes observed the same advantage taken of too close an intimacy. The fatted calf is killed for a stranger, but husks are considered good enough for the familiar friend. As regarded her entertainment, Jane Lee found nothing to complain of; but on awaking, after a sound night's rest, she discovered that she was in so far considered one of the family as to be no longer a free agent, and Fighting Jack's hospitality in his own camp was of that arbitrary and inconvenient nature which firmly refuses to speed the parting guest.

For a few bewildered seconds she could not remember where she was, nor how she got here, but when she recalled her scattered ideas, and rose to dress, she was first indignant, then frightened, to observe that her own garments had been taken away. In their place was laid out a picturesque costume, of the same style as that in which Nance attended on her the night before, though of brighter colour and more costly material. Presently that tawny handmaid, who seemed to have been on the watch, appeared with cold water in a pitcher and hot tea in a mug. Perhaps acting under orders, the girl answered questions in such a gibberish of real Romany, mixed with thieves' patter and tinkers' English, that the visitor could not understand a syllable, and finding it impossible to

regain her lost apparel, was obliged to make the best of the garments provided instead.

With the aid of Nance, whose nimble fingers could accomplish most tasks of dexterity, from pea-and-thimble to picking of pockets, she was soon in her new dress, and could not dissemble her satisfaction at its effect, even as seen in a cracked mirror, six inches by three. She felt she was embarked on an adventure such as had been often talked of amongst her school-companions at Bayswater, and it seemed none the less to her taste that it bore some affinity to the mystifications of a masquerade. But she had scarcely time to admire herself before a sudden jolt of the whole tenement took her off her feet, and she became aware, with much the same feelings as those of its occupant, when the horse is put to a bathing-machine, that her caravan was in motion, and the troop of wanderers in all probability on the march.

When she looked out, it was over the back of a tall white horse, plodding between leafy hedges, fresh and fragrant in the dews of a summer's morning.

Jericho, smoking his early pipe, walked by the shaft, and bade her "Good-morrow" with as little emotion as if they travelled together every day of their lives.

"Where are we going?" she asked, "and where is the master?"

"We doesn't call Jack Lee 'master,'" answered the gipsy; "we calls him 'patron,' and so must you. As to where he is, why, where he is always at this time o' the morning—*back*; and we're a-goin', as we goes always at this time o' the morning—*forward*."

"Stop the horse, then," she said; "I want to get down and walk."

"I dursn't," he returned, looking over his shoulder. "The patron said as you mustn't."

Was she a prisoner? Had this queer old man, who professed to be her father, really a design to carry her off, and in these days, too? It seemed impossible. Yet that iron face of his looked capable of anything. She felt a good deal frightened, but not without some relish for the excitement of such a situation.

"Jericho," she whispered, in that soft tone she had already discovered none of the other sex could hear unmoved, "we didn't know each other yesterday, but to-day you are my oldest friend here, and bound to be on my

side. Tell me, what have they done with my things? Can you get them back?"

"Hush!" he answered. "Stow that, and speak fair. You don't know the patron. Give in to him, and he'll stand by you through thick and thin. But I wouldn't try to cross him—not if I was you. Ah! you ain't a-seen him yet with his frill out. You'd never forget it if you had."

"Why, Jericho? Is he so terrible?"

"Terrible! I believe you. Now just look here: it was but last week, a Gorgio down in the swineherds' country wanted to sell him a *gry* (that's Romany, sister)—well, a horse, then—such a vicious devil you couldn't get a bridle on it. The dealer swore black, and all black, it was as quiet as a lamb; but when we went to examine the beast, it charged at us, open-mouthed, like a dog. Well, sister, the patron drew himself together, and let out. Ah! there's no living thing can stand up to one of Fighting Jack's left-handers, and the critter went down like a log. 'You've killed my horse,' says the Gorgio, 'and I'll give you in charge,' says he, putting his hand out to take and collar him. 'Drop that, brother,' says the patron; 'I can stun a horse, easy enough,' says he, 'I might *kill* a man!' and the dealer, though he was a tall, black-whiskered chap, twice the weight of any gipsy, was glad to stand a drink and say no more about it. I've told you afore, sister, and I make bold to tell you again—don't go for to cross the patron. It's as much as your life's worth. Steady! Here he comes."

Fighting Jack, smoking as usual, now made his appearance, and accosted his visitor with a deference she hardly expected, yet could not but mistrust, as inferring a consciousness of mastery and perfect control over her movements. To inquiries concerning their destination, he would only answer vaguely that they were travelling west. When she demanded what had become of her clothes and belongings, he assured her they were in safe keeping and would be restored at a proper time. For the present, he said, she must be content to remain in the caravan, wearing the costume of her tribe. She must make some allowance for a father's fancies. How could he bear to part with her again on the very day after he had recovered his long-lost child? She would find a gipsy's no unpleasant life. They had neither flocks nor herds, house nor land; but they owned all out of doors; they possessed whatever they

desired that belonged to their neighbours; and they never need want for ready money so long as every passing year produced its annual crop of fools. A young woman might do worse than take her share of so noble an inheritance, casting in her lot with the Romanies and old Jack Lee!

"Do you mean to keep me here a prisoner?" she asked, with as much dignity as the jolting caravan permitted, for the road was rough, and the white horse plodded on regardless of its ruts. "Do you think I am such a child I don't know the laws of the country? Do you think I have no friends to miss me, and track me out, and hand over you and your people to be dealt with by the nearest magistrate? Come, Mr. Lee, a joke is a joke, and I've humoured you thus far; but I could have you transported for keeping me here against my will!"

He looked at her with sincere admiration.

"You're a true Lee," said he affectionately, "down to the heels of your boots; and I'm proud of you! But when you bounce about lagging of your old father, my dear, you make him feel more like a laugh than a cry. Say you're joking now. You wouldn't do it if you could. Not you!"

"This is a very impracticable old gentleman," thought Jane, whose coolness seldom deserted her, "and threats seem only to amuse him; but as for my staying amongst these people, with their tawdry finery, their tattered blankets, their fleas and their dirt, I must make him understand it's preposterous, and that without delay!"

"Patron," she said, "because I'm a girl"—

"Won't you call me 'father,'" he interrupted, "just for this wunst?"

"We'll see about that when we are better acquainted. In the meantime, because I'm a girl perhaps you think me a fool, easily frightened, easily deceived; and you believe you can keep me here, like a bird in a cage, till it suits your pleasure to let me out?"

"I could if I would, easy enough, pretty. But that's not my way with them as I love. Now, steady, my lass; let's talk sense a bit. Business is business."

He refilled his pipe, and clenched it unlit between his teeth, as was his custom, when bringing his mind to bear on some knotty point. No two men could be more unlike, but watching the kind thoughtfulness of his expression, he reminded her of Jack Lopez, and the girl's eyes filled with tears.

"Business is business, my dear," he repeated, "and

that's but another word for money, set it up which end you will. Us Romanies is forced to do without, the best we can. But when all is said, a pound's worth of silver means meat, drink, and 'baccy, a bit of fire to cook with, and a blanket to sleep in; that's about the size of it, and wot's that but man's life? Now, look ye here, pretty; you came to us in silks and satins, chains and laces, like any lady of the land, and in your little pocket-book, or what-not, I counted two five-pound Bank of England notes, four golden sovereigns, half a crown, and a threepenny-bit. Oh, don't you make a mistake! I've got it here safe, and I wouldn't wrong you, not of a brass farden! That's fair and square enough."

"It is, if you hand it back."

"Don't you be afraid. It's a sight safer in my pocket than yours. Now look ye here; a man doesn't live to be over the half-hundred, in the ring or out of the ring, but he larns to put two and two together. I counts your money careful, and I says to myself, 'Jack,' says I, 'a young girl, not if she was a banker's daughter, doesn't carry fourteen quid two-and-nine about her for pocket-money. This here young woman,' says I, 'have left her home for reasons,' says I, 'and brought all her plunder along.' I ain't so fond of wagering as I used to be, but I'd wager a gallon now as I ain't very far out!"

He waited for an answer, and she frankly admitted that fourteen pounds two shillings and ninepence represented the whole of her worldly wealth.

"I knowed it!" said Fighting Jack triumphantly; "and that's one reason as I was so pleased to think you'd found your own people and come home at last. You'd been brought up a lady, a real lady; oh, I can see it with half an eye! Some day, pretty, you'll tell the old man how, and where, and why. But what's a lady with no more than fourteen quid to keep her? Why, I've made as much in a morning buying and selling of a lame horse! No, you're better with me, under your father's roof, as is nat'ral—though it's more liker a carriage nor a house, and none the worse for that; far better here than loose and lone on the wide world, with empty pockets and such a handsome face as yourn!"

Then he lit his pipe, and proceeded to smoke in thorough enjoyment, as having exhausted the argument, and settled the whole matter to their mutual satisfaction.

CHAPTER XVIII

MARKET VALUE

REVIEWING the situation, with a calm courage, probably inherited from that formidable champion Fighting Jack himself, Jane Lee decided that, for the present, she must let things take their course, and make the best of her captivity with the Egyptians, till it should please the patron, in his wisdom, to set her free. For a few days the change of scene and habits was exciting enough. In her gipsy costume, laughing with Jericho, helping Nance to cook, or listening to the old boxer's tales of adventure, she seemed to forget her own identity, and could sometimes almost fancy herself as true a Romany in character as she had now learned she was by birth. The other gipsies treated her with a deference exceedingly gratifying to her vanity, while the patron's care kept out of her sight and hearing such details of their wandering, predatory life as could shock her sensibilities, or offend her finer taste. She was, so to speak, a princess in the tribe, and received the homage due to a member of the royal family from all.

But after a few days the situation became irksome in the extreme. By the time she had mastered the names of some score of vagabonds, male and female, who formed the gang, she discovered that, with all the beauty of face and form neither dirt nor tatters could conceal, with all their inherent pride of birth, and professed superiority to the rest of mankind who lived in houses, the men were without valour, the women without discretion, while honesty seemed an unknown quality, and the honour proverbial even among thieves was stretched, on occasion, to a most treacherous elasticity. She grew very tired of the life and the company, only waiting, with the resolute persistency of her character, for an opportunity to wrench herself free from both. To escape had seemed at first an

easy matter, but day by day she became more convinced that a captivity is none the lighter because imposed by affection, and prison locks are none the less secure because the gaoler turns his key with a paternal smile.

There were two lawless natures in the troop, who sunned themselves with unfeigned enjoyment in her presence, to whom her departure would seem as a withdrawal of the very air they breathed.

One of these was Jericho. The young gipsy had been much struck by the courageous demeanour that so resisted his attempt at robbery, in the solitude of Richmond Park. And a subsequent acquaintance with the heroine of that adventure served but to deepen an impression so favourably begun. Jane Lee, with her proud carriage, soft voice, and refined bearing, was a being of superior order, when compared to the Joans, Nancies, and Madges who had hitherto constituted his experience of womankind. She moved among them like a queen, and while they hated her cordially in consequence, not a man in the tribe but felt honoured by her notice, and seemed to stand an inch taller on his bare feet, for a look and a smile from the patron's haughty visitor, who, wise in her generation, took care to be sparing of both. Jericho, conscious that she noticed him more than the others, felt proud of a distinction that encouraged certain vague hopes he had begun to cherish. He was one of the Lees, he argued, like herself. Their families had intermarried for generations, holding themselves, indeed, as the congenital branches of the oldest family amongst a people to whom Rohans and Montmorencies are but mushrooms of yesterday. Why should he not aspire to make this paragon his wife? Had he not been the lucky one of the whole tribe to light on their lost princess? Were they not marked with similar initials on the arm? There seemed a fate in it! The same stars that watched over royal dynasties no doubt protected a gipsy's destiny; and when Fighting Jack had quite done with life and leadership, who could show a better right to stand in his shoes than his kinsman Jericho, married to his daughter Jane?

Meantime, the first step was to obtain the patron's consent. And he fairly trembled to think of the outbreak so ambitious a suit was likely to provoke; for what was his own sense of admiration, and even attachment, compared to the old man's infatuation for this glorious creature,

who had come at last to brighten the end of his life, like a fine sunset at the close of a foul day?

Fighting Jack seemed never tired of watching his long-lost child, content to sit and stare at her, pipe in mouth, by the hour together, silent, and perfectly happy only to know she was in sight. A man of few words at all times, and prone, I fear, to strike sooner than speak, and swear sooner than pray, he watched her every look and gesture, with something of a dog's mute, vigilant fidelity, that anticipates the very wishes of its owner.

If Jane Lee had asked for anything unattainable without its commission, there is no crime at which the patron would have hesitated to gratify her desire. Yet now, perhaps for the first time, he began to regret his antecedents were not of a different nature, and to wish that he could meet his daughter's eye with a clear conscience, as having been an honest, as well as a brave man, all his life long.

Youth is too much given to look forward, yet, strangely enough, it never seems to anticipate the time when rest and retrospection constitute the pleasure of existence; when it is delightful to stretch the weary limbs in an arm-chair over a sea-coal fire, or under a sunny wall, while the failing mind floats on an ebbing tide of memories and reflections, far back into stirring scenes that shift, and waver, and vanish like the shadows in a dream. There is a complacent smile on the old man's face while, marshalling his phantom troops, he passes in orderly review the dangers, contests, and triumphs of his prime. How petty now seem jealousies and heart-burnings that formerly embittered the very bread he ate. How gladly would he offer the well-remembered rival a hand that once itched to take him by the throat. Was it worth while to watch and wait, to strain and strive for the wisp of laurels that came at last to his share? And how could he ever have been such a fool as to pine and sicken for those his stature was too low to reach?

When half-way down the hill, even long before entering the dark valley that leads to the foreign land, how happy must he be who can look back on a journey in which trips, and stumbles, and errors have been atoned for by an earnest desire to keep the straight path, a steadfast resolve, in spite of sinking strength and miry ways, to carry his burden faithful to the end! Jack Lee felt, rather than knew, now, when it was too late, that his course had been without a

compass, his efforts fruitless, his success a fallacy, and his life a mistake. All the more did it seem incumbent on him to provide a safe refuge for this long-lost daughter so unexpectedly restored. It needed far less knowledge of the world than he had acquired to warn the old prize-fighter that a handsome young lady, with wild blood in her veins, could have no more dangerous enemies than a wilful disposition and an empty purse.

"If you was to make your lucky some fine morning, my dear," said he, with an air of profound wisdom—"and mind ye, our people has eyes as can see through a milestone, pretty nigh, and ears to hear a watch tick a'most after it's run down—but no matter for that, if you was to up-stick and away, back among the Gorgios, as is nat'ral, why, where be you to find a home? that's wot beats *me*. I asks you wheres? No, no, my pretty. It's a tale as has been told too often, but it's always the same finish. A handsome, hearty lass, as thinks she knows best; a bare cupboard; a hard try to get work, and to do it after it's got. Ah! I've knowed plenty as yarns their bread by both, and I tell ye, the needle takes more out of 'em than the spade; then hunger, and strong black tea, and perhaps a mouthful of gin. I've been downhearted myself, and I'm not going to deny but what liquor warms the blood and keeps the mind easy, right or wrong, till it's died out. So the gal gets a sweetheart, maybe a swell, maybe a counter-jumper. 'And now,' says she, 'I've all I wants.' Only women has queer fancies, and she can't be off wondering, at odd times, whatever she should do if he was to take and leave her! It makes her think of them lights flashing in the river, and the long level bridges, quiet and empty, with the clocks a-strikin' to tell her it's time to be out of this, and go somewheres else. It turns her sick, poor thing, and she takes a three of gin this turn, and doses of it down 'cause it does her good. Wot's the use? It all comes about at last just as she thought it wouldn't. A long wait, a short letter, plain-spoken and unkinder than none; a empty pocket, and what's worse, a empty heart. Not a morsel of bread, only a bottle of spirits with the cork out, and we needn't ask who stands treat. Then the whistling shop, good clothes turned into drink, and a thirst as *won't* be squenched, contriving how to get more. So it comes to the saloons, and the streets, and maybe, the river after all!"

His voice was thick and hoarse, a tear hung in his

shaggy eyelashes, and he lifted her hand reverently to his lips. The girl, touched by the affection of his tone, felt impelled to give him her entire confidence, and imparted a piece of information she knew the next moment she ought to have withheld. It was a false move, but once made, could not be taken back.

"You need have no fear for me, patron," she said. "I'm not going to starve, and I'm not going to take in needlework, and I'm not going to drink gin. I shall have five hundred pounds of my own in a few weeks. That's enough to keep a young woman out of mischief, I hope!"

"Five hundred pounds!" The patron literally gasped. She was precious enough before, but the refined gold seemed gilt now, and the lily painted to some purpose. "Five hundred pounds!" he repeated. "That a daughter of mine should have five hundred pounds! Why, it's a purse for a queen! I won't ask you how you come by it, my dear, but however do you mean to spend it all? Pigs, poultry, sheep, cattle, horses, you might set up at once, and do such a business as would drive every other gipsy out of the trade. I could turn the money over in six weeks with New Forest ponies alone!"

She laughed at his eagerness.

"I have a better plan than that," she said. "I must get it first, though, and I ought to go to London; but we're travelling the other way, surely."

He lit a fresh pipe. This inheritance, no doubt, made his daughter an exceedingly valuable prize, but he could quite understand that she might slip through his fingers during the formalities necessary for its acquisition; while, on the other hand, if he kept the goose in too close captivity, the golden eggs might not be forthcoming at all. The result of his reflections was that he ought to hold on for the present to the auriferous bird, and he resolved to take Jericho into his counsels, giving that willing auxiliary strict injunctions to counteract all attempts of the prisoner to escape.

He might have been more puzzled had he known that Jane Lee's intention was to return the whole sum to Mervyn Strange, at some future time, when she had obtained by its aid a firm footing in society; and though she sometimes speculated as to whether she was not bound in honour to fulfil her engagement, should it be impossible to liquidate her debt, I fear she came to the conclusion

that rather than substitute the former payment for the latter, she would repudiate both!

After such a confession, the gipsy's guest found herself free to leave the caravan at such intervals as she chose, and, ignorant that she was only the more closely watched, rejoiced in this comparative release. The patron seemed anxious to please and humour her, judging discreetly enough that, even from the strictest custody, a girl worth five hundred pounds might find fifty ways of flight, at ten pounds a bribe. He knew his people well, and thoroughly appreciated their devotion to their chief—a romantic and honourable fidelity, incorruptible by silver, but hardly proof against gold. It was imperative, he thought, to make her captivity agreeable, and thus neutralise her natural inclination to escape.

She was allowed, therefore,—always in gipsy costume, for the patron himself kept her original silks and satins under lock and key,—to go abroad with the others, on such expeditions as entailed no danger of collision with the rural police, and always under the care of Jericho, who assumed her guardianship the more readily that the patron had thought well to drop certain hints regarding the market value of his charge.

"She mustn't slip through our fingers, lad," said the old man—"neither yours nor yet mine. She's as handsome as paint; you can see as much without a candle. But you mind what I tell ye, she's better nor that—she's as good as gold!"

CHAPTER XIX

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

JANE LEE, with her natural vivacity of character, thoroughly enjoyed emancipation from the jolting caravan, in which she had spent nearly a week without change. She had grown tired of the patron, Nance was no longer an object of curiosity, nor Jericho, though he thought differently, of interest. The other gipsies she had "reckoned up," as she called it, in the first eight-and-forty hours; and without some fresh excitement, some active occupation, she felt as if she must die from sheer depression of spirits, and disgust with her uneventful life. Inheriting the roving tendencies of her race, she longed for change of scene and surroundings, from the same instinct that prompted them to strike their tents, and shift their encampment, week by week. It was with no slight sense of hope and excitement that she learnt from Jericho the patron's intention to attend Swansdown Races with his whole gang, squatting on the edge of the moor, in a wild corner, called "Nobody's Nook," where three counties met, and whence he could detach and recall his foraging parties so conveniently as to keep them, in a measure, "on the windy side of the law."

"It's the pleasantest jaunt of the whole year," said Jericho, "and the most profitable. The constables dursn't interfere, because as the one can't get liberty to cross over the other's border. There's sticks for the gathering, and no questions asked, rabbits half as big as sheep, feeding out by scores, and not a keeper nearer than five mile. Two days' racing, and twice as many fools as you'd find at Kingsbury or Hampton. Nance took three quid dukkering alone, last time, besides a note as she borrowed unbeknownst from a farmer's breeches-pocket. It was a country note, and we dursn't go for to change it—but that's neither here nor there."

"Dukkering?" asked Jane Lee. "What do you mean by dukkering?"

"Summat as you would do better than most, sister. The Gorgios calls it telling of fortunes. You goes smiling up to a gentleman on horseback—them's mostly the softest with such as you—and you looks so sweet, and speaks so kind, half turning your head away, and laying of your hand on his horse's neck, that he outs with a quid, just for the pleasure of putting his fist in yours, while you gammons him about his bold looks and his handsome face, and the dark woman not a hundred miles off, nor yet ten, as is breaking her heart for him, because as she comes of a different race, and it's as much as her life's worth for them to be seen together, when she's forbidden to think of him, even in her dreams. And so it is!" added Jericho, kindling suddenly into a blaze of passion, as unexpected as it seemed uncalled for. "I can't a-bear it, sister, and I won't! If I was to catch you carrying on like that with the best Gorgio as ever sat in a saddle, I wouldn't care, not if I was to swing for it next 'sizes, but I'd knife him as sure as I stand here—don't you make any mistake—and maybe you too!"

She turned on him a calm look of astonishment, even ridicule, that made him feel exceedingly uncomfortable and thoroughly ashamed. They were walking alone, somewhat in advance of the troop, having determined to spare the old white horse by ascending on foot a steep, interminable hill, that offered fresh views of rich and varied beauty at every turn. Below lay wide extending plains of field and forest, meadow and cornland, wooded knolls, dark ravines, and sunny slopes, losing themselves in a dim haze, lit up by the gleams of a winding river that shone out at intervals in threads of light below the distant hills. Underfoot they brushed the wild red heather, bursting into bloom, and overhead a clump of fir-trees, dark and majestic as cedars, stood out against the calm blue sky, laced with level streaks of cloud. The gipsy's whole being was stirred by the scene, and he felt that now or never must he lay his heart open to his companion, and set his future on the cast, or, as he expressed it, "go in a perisher and take his chance."

"I'm a fool, sister," he said, with something like a blush on his brown face. "But it seems to me as you makes fools of us all! I hadn't no call to let out like that, and I

asks your pardon free. I'm the last as would want to catch you tripping, the very last, a-cause I knows too well what would come of it. Ah, we keeps it out of our minds with drink and what not, but it's a fearful matter is death!"

"What do you mean?" she asked, turning pale, for there was something ominous in his earnest manner, and stern, though pitiful face.

"You ought to know," he answered. "But though you're a Romany born, you've taken your teaching from the Gorgios, and there's many things wherein us is wiser nor them. We holds by our own laws. Maybe you thought as we hadn't got none. I shouldn't wonder if you didn't believe as you was free to go where you would and marry who you liked. Never such a thing!"

She started. Her captivity had not yet appeared in so slavish a light; but the combative instinct was roused, and she answered defiantly, "Who's to prevent me?"

"Not me! I hopes from my heart!" he answered, with a shudder; "and yet needs must, whether or no, if I got the office regular from the tribe. But it wouldn't come to that; never say it. You're not the sort as would take up with a Gorgio."

"Why not?"

"Sister, shall I tell you why? Yes. It's only fair you should know, and you won't bear *me* no ill-will. Them laws was made hundreds and hundreds of years before you and me was born. When a Romany lass—no matter whether she's a Rawny, a chief's daughter, such as you, or a come-by-chance, like Mumping Madge—thinks well to forget her tribe and her nation for the sake of a stranger, there's no two ways about it—she must never come back no more!"

"She wouldn't want to, I should think."

"Ay, but she mustn't be seen to disgrace us neither. So we brings her case before our own beaks, and they gives sentence according."

"And what is the punishment?"

She tried to speak carelessly, but her voice faltered and her heart sank in spite of herself.

"We cast lots who is to do the job; shaking beans in a bag, maybe, or pulling straws out of the patron's hand. Him as gets the devil's number clears out of camp and goes to work at once, tracking and following of her up, no

matter where she's hid, till he comes within arm's length at last."

"And then?"

He pulled his knife from its sheath, ran his finger along the edge, and made as if he drew it across his throat. The pale face, the glistening eyes, told their own tale. No spoken denunciation could have seemed so terrible as this vague suggestion of murder in dumb show. She was fairly intimidated, but summoned all her courage to dissemble the truth.

"I don't suppose even death will deter a woman from having her own way," she answered lightly. "However, I no more want to marry a Gorgio, as you call them, than a gipsy; so it makes little matter to me. Come, we have had enough of horrors! Tell me something about the races, the booths, the shows—all the fun of the fair."

Then Jericho launched out, nothing loath, on an enthusiastic description of the enjoyments he anticipated from the next three days. Swansdown Races, it appeared, constituted a western Saturnalia, established, it would seem, on behalf of a rustic population, a trifle thirstier than Londoners, with equal tendencies to vicious indulgences, but less shrewdness, and a greater aptitude to be gulled by palmistry, ring-dropping, the confidence trick, and other flagrant impositions practised by rogues who keep sober, for the cozening of fools who get drunk.

Such a gathering was the gipsies' harvest. Encamped on Nobody's Nook, a bare edge of moor, tolerably dry in all weathers, where fuel was to be had for the stealing in certain adjoining coppices, owned by an absent squire, they established a basis, as it were, from which they could carry on their dishonest operations with as much comfort as success. No keepers, indeed, meant no game, but there were hen-roosts tumbling to pieces on every side, curs chained to empty casks, that barked furiously, but never woke their masters till the thieves had got clear off, and, better still, handsome farmers' daughters, happy, healthy, and ignorant, never grudging a bit of bacon and a mug of cider to the plausible gipsy, buying tawdry tinsel at the price of virgin gold, and crossing their own toil-worn palms with silver, to be pocketed by swarthy fortune-tellers, for the promise of an undeclared lover, a prospective husband, and an eventual family, seldom less than ten. Even without the races, such a primitive neighbourhood was after the

Romany's own heart; but when these indigenous advantages came to be enhanced by a two-days' gathering, that collected from far and near an agricultural population, taking scarcely another holiday in the year, it is easy to conceive how large a share of the besotted workers' earnings went into the pockets of the persuasive idler, and how, after Swansdown Races, the Lees and Lovels who attended were sleek and saucy, and flush of ready money for at least a month.

"There's business to be done too," continued Jericho, warming to his narrative, "for a chap as knows a horse when he see him, and sees him when nobody else don't know as he is looking on. It's a good game, sister—you wouldn't peach—you dursn't—so there's no call for telling of you. 'Twas but this time two year, I was on the ground afore sunrise, looking after a wire as I let drop out of my hand by chance overnight, at Brimscombe Brake, by the back of the course. I was afraid a rabbit might have got hung up in it and hurted hisself. I'm fond o' dumb critters, and I'd a-taken of him out, you may be sure. Well, I warn't a-thinking of anything particular, when I see two swells, as far as I could judge, for it was barely light, standing right in the middle of the track. 'Hold on a bit, Jerry,' says I to Jericho—that's me, sister—'and keep dark; this here ain't no business of yourn,' so I dropped down among the heather, soft and quiet as a mouse. Presently I hears the blowing of horses half a mile off, and a beat of hoofs, even and regular, the way them thoroughbreds gallops, when they stretches out. Ah! I've always said as 'twas cruel hard lines to lag a cove for choring a gry. Horse-stealing's against the law—that's right enough—but think of the temptation, sister, and gipsies is but flesh and blood after all.

"Well, nearer they comes, and past me like a flash. I could just tell one from t'other. Three of them there was. The first and the last seemed larger than the middle one, more growed-out like, but *he* was the beauty. Dark chestnut, with one white foot in front—oh! I took notice—and an eye in his head almost as bright and soft as yourn, sister, and as big again."

Jericho, losing himself for a space in memories of this paragon, Jane Lee showed sufficient interest in his tale to ask, "Did he win?"

"I couldn't make sure. He was gaining on the first,

when they passed my hiding-place, and the third horse, he couldn't come a-nigh, try how he would, but wot I heard was good enough for me. Says one of the swells, turning round to light his weed, and chucking of the match into the back o' my neck, he stood that close, 'A very satisfactory trial,' says he. 'Never was extended,' says he, the way them Gorgios bluffs amongst theirselves. 'Why, it makes him five pounds better than the old horse, at the weights, and I don't see how he can lose.' T'other was a younger chap, with bright eyes and a smooth face. 'Lose!' says he, 'don't talk of it,' says he; 'I've gone for the gloves this time. Let's get back and have some breakfast!'

"I'd had mine—I never starts without—but I was home before them, I'll lay a wager. And the patron, he didn't cut no time to waste neither. In less than an hour he'd rigged hisself out in a brand-new suit of broadcloth, clean collar, starcher, and a tall hat. If he'd kep his gloves on and his mouth shut, blest if you'd a-known him from a parson or a beak. Off by rail, too, first-class and everythink. Oh, he didn't do it by halves! That's the best plant as we've ever been in, before or since. If I could take such another morning walk, only once in the year, I'd travel in my carriage and pair, like a lord of the land."

Her interest was flagging. "I suppose you all backed the handsome chestnut," she said, with a yawn, "and he won?"

"Better than that," he answered. "He laid agin him free. First at evens, then at two and three to one, till the very morning of the race, and he never come to the post. The blacksmith lamed him someway, d'ye see, putting of his plates on so bad as he couldn't turn round in his box. That blacksmith warn't asked to lift a hammer for the stable again, and hadn't no need. He's hard up, I daresay, by now; but I seen him myself, driving a trotting-match for a hundred sovereigns, money down, the week before last. He's a kinsman of the patron. That's how it come about, very like. A Lee always stands by a Lee."

The intricacies of his narrative were lost on his listener, who was deep in her own thoughts. Swansdown Races, if she could profit by the opportunity, seemed to promise a fair chance of escape. Turning matters over in her own mind, with characteristic rapidity, she formed a plan that she thought might afford liberty of action in detaching her

for a time from her comrades ; and, if nothing better came of it, would at least furnish such amusement as should take her for a few hours out of herself. Jericho was obviously in a communicative mood, and she determined to get out of him all the information she required.

CHAPTER XX

PALMISTRY

"I OUGHT to take my share of work, no less than play," said she. "What was it you told me I could do, Jericho? Dukkering, I think you called it. I should like to try my hand."

"Can you read the stars, sister?"

"Can you?"

"No; I can't; nor nobody else! That's the bare truth. Dukkering's different. It's no use humbugging of you."

"Well, it's not very difficult, I daresay. How am I to begin?"

He assumed an air of importance befitting so lofty a subject, and entered at once on a scientific explanation.

"Of dukkering, my sister," said he, "there is three kinds. Us Romanies practises all, but the Chorodies—mean low scum, as their very name tells you, and the Kora-mengre, hawkers and criers of stinking fish, and such like—never tries it on but with two at most. This here knowledge, as teaches us to peep behind the curtain that hangs afore next week, was larnt us by our fathers, who were larnt by their fathers, hundreds and hundreds of years back, in the beginning of time. The first, and the oldest way of all, is to tell a fortune by the stars, but it won't take with the Gorgios now as it used. Perhaps they think our right to the stars no better than theirs; nor you can't always get a look at them neither, even on summer nights; so it's easier to fall back on the four suits, or the palm of a man's hand. I could larn you the first in ten minutes, if so be as I'd got a pack of cards in my pocket; but the daddles is always ready, and I'll show you the three lines of fate—so as you'll never forget them again—in less than three minutes."

He took her slender hand in his own, and turning the

palm uppermost, traced with his brown finger the light creases, scarcely perceptible, on its delicate surface.

"This here, sister," said he, "is the Line of Life. See how it travels right athwart from finger to wrist, and loses itself at both ends, because a man can't tell where he came from, when he was born, nor where he is going when he dies. That's wot beats us, Gorgios, Romanies, and all! There's the Line of Wealth, very faint it is, and uncertain, but cutting deeper as folks grow older. Just like money comes with years to them as lays their mind to it, and saves up against the time as they won't want for nothing but the price of half a day's work with a spade. It's a line, this is, as you mustn't make much account of with young folks, gals in particular; them won't hear of money or money's worth, alongside of love; but the farmers, especially the fat 'uns, likes to be told they've got it strong! Then here's a mark as you show plainer than t'others; this means going from place to place, foreign or what not. When you've a brown-faced, curly-haired chap to deal with, you may tell him as he's bound to make a long voyage; and if there's rings in his ears, you're safe enough in warning of him as his lawful wife is looking out for him this minute across the sea; but you won't go for to make mischief, you may say, if there's any petticoats by, for he'll be generous to the poor gipsy like a free, brave, open-hearted sailor, and she wouldn't bring tears into the blue eyes or the black, according to the company, as is a-watching of him now with a sore heart along of his handsome face. He'll out with a bit more silver, you may be sure, for fear as the gipsy should peach, though he'll laugh right out, and swear as he don't believe a word, and only does it for the sport! There's another yet, sister, going across from the thumb. It's called the Line of Fate, this is, and you must be very careful how you work it when you've to do with old folks, or even the middle-aged. If it's short and shallow, on a soft young hand like your own, you may out with it plump, as this is the sign to teach how long they has to live. Soon as it runs in to meet the Line of Life there's no more to be said. The candle's burnt out, and the game's up. I'd pass it over, if I was you, with the toughest customers, and stick to the money or the sweethearts. Nobody thinks themselves so old as they can't do with plenty of both, and you needn't believe in these no more than you like. It's different with the Line of Fate."

He spoke in an altered tone, as though, like other priests of a false superstition, he had discarded all but the most impossible and preposterous tenets of his creed.

"Then you think I have a long time to live?" said she, inspecting the lines on her own palm, with an interest of which she felt half-ashamed.

He caught the slender hand and pressed it to his lips.

"Sister," said he, looking round to make sure they were not observed, "when *your* time comes, I'll ask no better than to take my chance with you for good and evil. If you and me take our leap in the dark together I don't care when it is nor where."

Jane Lee, I need hardly observe, at this stage of my narrative, was one of those women, fortunately rare as they are dangerous, who consider they have a prescriptive right to the homage of all mankind. They seem to believe that the other sex is created, like the lower animals, for their especial service without thanks or remuneration, and that in no case are they to admit the justice of a proverb which insists on the same sauce being served with the gander that is appropriate to the goose! So long as a man could be of the least use, she felt justified in availing herself of his time, intellect, money, everything he chose to offer. If he was such a fool that he must needs fling his heart after the rest of his possessions, so much the worse for him! She didn't want it, she didn't ask for it, but she looked on it in the light of an umbrella, for instance, politely offered during a shower, a temporary convenience to be opened, made use of, and returned with thanks.

Women of such temperament, if they care to try, usually attain considerable social success. They skate on thin ice indeed, but it seldom gives way under their light, careless tread. They play with the sharpest instruments, but avoid cutting their own fingers, and warm themselves comfortably at a fire that scorches more earnest natures to the bone. They have just enough feeling to take an interest in the game. Were they perfectly callous there would be no pleasure in playing, and they can gauge the fever raging in the hearts of their victims, by an agreeable sense of warmth and vitality in their own. To give them their due, they are exceedingly loath to come down from the high ground whence they elect to offer battle. When they do, their defeat is irremediable and complete.

The Amazon of history is said to have cut off her right

breast that its shapely outline might not hinder the drawing of her bow, but our modern Penthesilea, whose low-cut dress would hardly permit the concealment of such an eyesore, practises a less obvious mutilation, and leaving her bosom to sink and swell before an admiring world in all its natural softness, attains a deeper immunity by hardening and scarifying her heart.

"Do you mean you like me so much?" asked Jane Lee, in those half-tender, half-mocking tones that so bewitched her listener. "Why, Jericho, you always call me your sister, and you haven't known me much more than a week!"

"A week! What matter for that? Does it take a week for a man's eyes to be blinded, and the very heart scorched up in his body! I tell you, that time when I dropped on you in Richmond Park I felt how it was going to be—the first five minutes was enough!"

"But you don't think ladies—I mean, you don't suppose women are so impressionable? I wouldn't look at the best man in the kingdom unless I'd known him at least a year and a day."

"That's a match! Shake hands on it! In a year and a day I'll come and put you in mind of what you said this minute. You'll forget, likely enough, but I won't. It'll be meat and drink, clothes and firing; ah! the very pith and marrow of life to me from now till then."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime there's nothing on this mortal earth as you can ask that I won't grant, free. Says you, 'Jerry, I wants this or that'; no matter what—a velvet gownd, a gold ticker, jewels for your ears, or your fingers, or your hair—and Jerry, he answers, 'Right you are.' If 'tis a lagging matter, more nor that, though Jerry should swing for it, silks or velvets, laces or diamonds, you won't need to ask again!"

"You say so now, Jerry, and think so, perhaps; but supposing I wanted you to do something, and the patron told you not, how would it be then? You like me, I daresay, but you're afraid of him."

"Try me!"

There was a world of faith and devotion in the dark eyes that met her own so honestly. She pitied him, and could not help showing it.

"Poor Jerry!" said she. "I suppose I ought to believe

you. At least you deserve a trial. Now you *can* do something to please me, if you will."

"Speak up, sister; it's got to be done, right or wrong!"

"Then you must persuade the patron to let me go with you to the races. I am so tired of that caravan. I have scarcely been out of it for an hour till to-day. I want to see a little life. I want to hear people speak English again, instead of a gibberish I cannot answer nor understand. Will you explain to the patron? Do you know what I mean yourself?"

"I suppose I do, sister. You must come to it gradual. Like a singing-bird as is caught and shut up in a wicker-cage—he takes and puts a sod of turf in at first, so as it shouldn't think it's never got to be out o' doors no more. You've seen the Romanies in their camp, now you'd like to know how we carries on when we's afield—you wants to take the rough with the smooth."

"Exactly, Jerry. You understand me already. Now promise you will manage for you and me to start off together early the first day of Swansdown Races, away from all the others, we two by ourselves. What I want is a holiday, and not to be accountable to anybody but you."

He looked thoroughly happy. Such an expedition, so carried out, seemed all that was most enjoyable in the world.

"I'll try to persuade the patron," said he. "But he's liker to say yes for you than for *me*. I don't know what to think, though, of your going out on the dukkering lay; you're not used to it, you know."

"Oh, Jerry! that will be half the fun. Besides, I don't want to shirk my share of the work, and I'll bring back all I make, fair, honest, and above-board, like—like—a real Romany."

She smiled in his face, so handsome, so mirthful, so exquisitely provoking, that Jericho lost his head, and tried to pass his arm round her waist. For some secret reason, his effrontery seemed to excite amusement rather than indignation.

"You are in too great a hurry by a year," she said, disengaging herself with a laugh—"and a day. A bargain is a bargain. Here comes the caravan. Don't forget your promise, Jerry. Good-night!"

The patron's opposition to their scheme was less violent than had been anticipated.

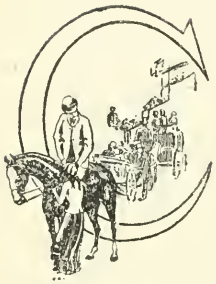
Fighting Jack felt in the position of the gentleman who was presented with a white elephant. He had attained the possession of something very valuable, no doubt; but its care entailed trouble, responsibility, and expense. Though he considered the best of everything not a jot too good for his daughter, and grudged no outlay on her behalf, he would have liked to see her more grateful for the comparative luxuries with which he surrounded her; more alive to the inconveniences she caused him in the way of politeness, sobriety, and an occasional clean shirt.

"I'm not sure I didn't do as well without her," thought the patron, reflecting on the amount of strong drink he usually took during Swansdown Races. "But it would never do to let her slip through my fingers now. Dash it! wot a handsome lass it is! And five hundred pounds! It's a vast of money. Them good-looking ones is mostly bad to drive; but when a gal's got five hundred pounds, it gives her a kind of a right to have her own whims and her own way. I must humour the lass. My Shuri was always at her best when I humoured of her; and if the wench really wants to go playing of her high jinks at these here races, why, go she must. I'll see she's well looked after, but Jack Lee's not the man to say her nay!"

So it was settled at nightfall, after the important business of encamping, that the young lady should try her luck next morning, in appropriate costume, as a gipsy fortune-teller, under the tuition and guardianship of Jericho Lee.

CHAPTER XXI

SWANSDOWN RACES



ARD of the running horses, names, weights, and colours of the riders! card of the running horses!" etc. The oft-repeated cry ran glibly off Jericho's lips, with a facility born of practice.

Partly from good looks, partly from good manners, he sold all his cards, and made a fair margin of profit, hours before the first racehorse appeared on the ground, attended by its escort of idlers, admiring sheet, hood, and quarter-piece—for of the animal itself nothing could be seen but four long legs, not of the soundest, and a long swinging tail. An elderly, shrivelled man, chewing a straw, walked by the side of this well-concealed celebrity, which was led by a stunted urchin, who could not, it is to be hoped, be such a scoundrel as he looked.

But although some time must elapse before the saddling-bell should ring for the first event of the day, a deal of business had already been got through by those who catered for the amusement of the pleasure-seekers. A merry-go-round, bearing the appropriate name of Wheeler's Royal Circus, was in full swing, its rotatory chargers, black, red, spotted, and grey, mounted by children in every stage of stickiness, the result of a thriving trade driven in a neighbouring booth, whence could be heard at intervals the mild crack of a pea-rifle, pointed by some rustic marksman, grinning and rosy-cheeked, whose rare success was rewarded in hardbake, elecampane, or nuts.

Next to this popular resort and emporium of indigestion, but dominating and diminishing its importance, by superior height and pretension, stood Bellingham's Grand Menagerie,

hoisting the flags of many nations, including our own royal ensign, as purporting to have visited the whole habitable earth, but to hail last from Windsor, Balmoral, or other residence of Her Majesty the Queen. Portrayed on the outside, this collection of animals seemed interesting to a student of natural history, affording specimens of beasts and birds hitherto unknown in such gigantic proportions, so that it was difficult to imagine how the royal elephant, royal lion, and royal tiger, all of colossal dimensions, could be stowed away within the limits of the canvas supposed to contain them. A brass band, consisting of two musicians, one of whom ingeniously performed on a gong with his feet, materially enhanced the impression of terror it seemed desirable to convey, and more than one future hero, lately breeched, having paid for entrance with considerable misgiving, retreated in a panic, forfeiting his penny rather than pass the awful curtain that shrouded these terrors of the wilderness from an everyday world.

Not so with the Giant, the Fat Lady, and the Two-headed Child. Here curiosity might gaze its fill unchecked by fear, for the first distinguished personage was deaf, the second affable, and the third so fast asleep in bed, that only one head could be seen above the blankets, and the second must be left to the imagination of a spectator.

I fancy this show afforded little satisfaction, yet those who came out advised their friends to go in. People do not care to be singular in their indiscretions, therefore, perhaps, it is that—"One fool makes many."

Besides these sights, to which there was no free admission, many amusements were provided that might be enjoyed for nothing. Posture-masters, in motley and spangles, twisted their limbs in every conceivable contortion, as if they were made of gutta-percha. Lying supine, these athletes kicked their progeny recklessly in air to catch them again in a sitting position on the soles of their feet, or, bending their own bodies backward as if the vertebral column had been taken out, picked up needles with their eyelids from underneath their heels, resuming the natural attitude of the human body with a startling somersault, no less surprising than the intricate feat of which it seemed an inevitable result.

Here, too, might be observed an exceedingly dirty man in a close-fitting jersey, bound hand and foot so effectually that the cords seemed to cut into his flesh,

while he implored the bystanders to draw his knots yet tighter, that he might show how easily he would extricate himself when another shilling—only one more shilling in coppers — had been subscribed. Probably the added money was not forthcoming, as he never seemed to effect his own release; nor, indeed, under any circumstances could he vie in popularity with his neighbour, a puffy person, also in close-fitting garments, who professed to be champion boxer of England, open to compete with all the world, and hitherto unvanquished by mortal arm. Not so improbable a boast, inasmuch as his comprehensive challenge did not appear to have been taken up! This worthy, it would seem, was a friend of the patron, having been knocked out of time indeed some years ago in a drunken brawl by the old gipsy, with an energy the champion could not forget. Much liquor had subsequently drowned all unkindness between them, but they seldom met without fomenting their reconciliation in another cup.

The great boxer, catching sight of Jack Lee, let his chest contract, his shoulders fall, and his muscular system relax itself, while he desisted from his pompous march round a circle of some five feet in diameter, where he had been strutting to show himself, like a cock-grouse "drumming" in the glows of sunset on a Highland hill.

"Old pal," said the hero, in a husky voice, that yet impressed the listeners with a nameless awe, "I've been a-looking out for you the whole of this here blessed morning — blessed if I hain't! Bless your old eyes! Come on and have a blessed drain."

No gipsy could be proof against such a storm of benedictions, and Fighting Jack consented willingly enough, but demanded courteously whether the other wouldn't put the muffles on and "play light" for a quiet five minutes, to please the yokels before they went to refresh?

"Muffles be blessed!" said the other, with a grunt that seemed to scorn such make-believe, but he muttered below his breath, "Not if I know it, my lad. Bless me, that light play of yourn is like the kicks of a horse!"

So the two disappeared in a drinking-booth, and Jane Lee congratulated herself that for the present she was released from the patron's supervision, and need be accountable to Jericho alone. This guardian, however, stuck by her like a leech. They had scarcely been on

the course an hour ere his companion's beauty excited such general remark, not only from boors, reeling about in their smock-frocks, dazed with cider, but farmers and gentlefolks on horseback, or in carriages, that even the ladies asked their admirers, "Have you seen the handsome gipsy?" professing with womanly generosity the highest approval of her swarthy charms, yet tolerant of contradiction, and in no degree irritated by a difference of opinion in their particular friends.

More than once did Jericho's slender fingers steal to the knife he carried in his waistband, while the leer of a drunkard, or, more offensive still, the presuming stare of some bucolic coxcomb, was directed at his beautiful charge. Poor Jericho! he had never enjoyed Swansdown Races so little, nor been so pleased to hear the bell ring, directing the course to be cleared for the Swansdown Hunt Handicap—an event that would afford him some brief respite from his torture, by riveting attention on the great business of the day.

The two gipsies had stationed themselves opposite the weighing-enclosure, which was immediately under a wooden stand—entrance five shillings—occupied by the exclusive and aristocratic element of the gathering. Jane Lee stood staring listlessly at certain gaudy hats and light-coloured robes in one of its compartments, thinking how much better she would herself be dressed when her time came, and had even brought her mind to bear on the fashion of an attractive toilet for Epsom and Ascot, when Jericho, restlessly on the watch, saw her start, redden suddenly to the roots of her black hair, and turn white in the next breath. Following the direction of her eye, he only noticed a clumsy jockey, in blue jacket, with a yellow cap, carrying saddle and bridle out of the weighing-tent, and decided he must seek elsewhere for the cause of his companion's agitation.

"You are ill, sister," he whispered; "come away out of the crush. You look as if you are going to faint."

She recovered herself while he spoke, and protested with truth "she had never fainted in her life, that he was always fancying things, and she wished he would let her alone!"

Meanwhile the yellow-capped jockey, in a prodigious heat and fuss, busied himself with the adjustment of sundry rings, reins, and other contrivances for the guidance

of a wicked little chestnut, preparatory to a hoist on its back from a grave man in gaiters, administered with such good-will as nearly to cant him over on the other side; after which ceremonies, man and horse were led carefully out, and left to their own devices in the middle of the course.

It needed no preliminary canter, not even a second glance, to satisfy Jane Lee of their identity. The pair before her could not be mistaken. They were none other than Forward James and Potboy! That Paravant had not recognised her she felt sure, and no wonder! He was as yet too fresh at the game to spare attention from his own unparalleled boots and breeches, the length, or rather shortness, of his stirrups, and the nervous agitation experienced by every novice when he rides his first race. Potboy, too, like many half-bred horses, was a disagreeable mount; in training eager, fractious, and inclined to pull unpleasantly hard. It took the rider all his time to bounce and sidle in safety to the start, nor did the little horse become quite amenable till within two hundred yards from home, then he tired and faded ignominiously to the easy canter of an old gentleman's cob.

Though Paravant, *nolens volens*, made all the running, the pace was by no means good. Before the race was over, and he had flourished in last but one, Jane Lee, with characteristic recklessness, jumped at one of those prompt decisions to which she owed the many chances and changes of her eventful life. It was her maxim that nothing when accomplished was half so preposterous as it seemed while in course of preparation, and that you never knew what you could do till you tried.

She resolved to obtain an interview with James Paravant then and there. Fighting Jack, as luck would have it, was safely disposed of with his boon-companion. If she could get quit of Jericho, she might test the memory and affection of her old admirer while telling his fortune in her gipsy character, confident that till she thought well to disclose herself, he would not find her out.

"Jerry," said she, "I'm going to try my hand at dukkering now. Don't you think we had better separate? If people see us together they'll suspect you are prompting me, and it isn't all on the square."

"Right you are, sister," answered Jerry, who often

boasted he was "as deep as a well, and always kept something up his sleeve"; meaning that he was capable of over-trumping an adversary at a game of duplicity, and liked nothing better than such encounters—cheat against cheat, and the biggest liar take all.

"Where shall we meet again, Jerry?"

"Where you please, sister. Here, if you like, in two hours' time. You'll have made a matter of ten quid by that, if I know anything of the trade."

"Will you give me five for my earnings?"

But Jericho shook his head, and slipped away through the crowd, with a keener expression than common in his brown handsome face.

Jane Lee, taking advantage of the liberty thus accorded, crossed into the racecourse, and began to hunt about amongst its motley occupants for the jockey in blue and yellow cap. Her search was the more ineffectual that those unsuccessful colours had long ago been covered by an overcoat and a white hat, although a pair of thin boots and wiry spurs, with a straight whip sticking from his pocket, still betrayed the identity of one of those gentleman-riders who provided sport (and amusement) for the meeting. It was provoking she could not come across him, and she showed her vexation in her gait. The hurried step, the impatient gestures, were watched with some interest by a spare old man, bent nearly double, in a brown greatcoat, shabby hat, and large horn spectacles, who seemed, though at a respectful distance, to be strangely fascinated by the handsome gipsy.

She never noticed him; her mind was otherwise engaged. At length it occurred to her that if she halted here in the middle of the course her fine singing might excite attention, and, attracting those within hearing, bring to her side the person she desired to meet.

Nor had she miscalculated her powers. Booths, shows, tumblers, and merry-go-rounds were forsaken by a motley crowd, that pushed and peered and widened and wavered round one common centre, while the handsome woman with the dark eyes carolled out the following gipsy ballad in her full, sweet voice:—

"Kind gentleman, there astride on your mare,
That wants your fortune told,
Come bow your ear to the gipsy, my dear;
But cross her palm with gold.

And all in a look, like print on a book,
She'll read your luck to-day,
And tell you the star of the lady afar,
Who has stolen your heart away!"

"It's my belief you're a gipsy thief!
And stealing is all you can,
From shelf and store, from platter and floor,
From child, and woman, and man.
The babe in bed, the lamb in shed,
The hen that cackles to lay,
And coin from vest, and heart from breast,
You steal them all away!"

She looked askance, with her merry glance,
And he bent in the saddle there,
To meet the eyes that carried the prize
From all the folk in the fair.
"My beauty!" quoth he, "ride home with me;
Deny me not, I pray;
For it's come to pass, that a gipsy lass
Has stolen my heart away!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE BAIT

"WHAT a lovely voice!" exclaimed the ladies. "What a handsome girl!" added the gentlemen. "This be a loikely wench, sure-ly!" pronounced the rustics, while Jane Lee's audience, after the fashion of open-air critics when paying-time is at hand, melted discreetly away.

Amongst the few who remained, brother professionals, tramps, and the poorest of the agriculturists, from whom contributions could not reasonably be expected, were two individuals apparently belonging to a more prosperous class. One of these was the infirm old man in spectacles, the other, that gentleman-rider in an overcoat, whose yellow cap had showed in front during a great part of the race, with such unfortunate results at the run-in.

Forward James, in spite of his failure, was yet thoroughly satisfied with himself, an agreeable state of mind rendering people affable, tolerant, and in charity with all men. If not to his valet, or his trainer, or the stable in general, our gentleman-jockey was a hero to himself, and felt almost as well pleased with his new silk jacket as if it had passed the judge's chair a length in front. The ambition of his life was gratified. He had entered the lists at last, and would hereafter be considered a sporting character by the little world of yeomen, horse-dealers, and stable-boys wherein he was desirous to shine.

Since Miss Lee's departure from the rectory—a crushing blow, of which the effects punished him even now—young Paravant had grown restless, discontented, uncomfortable, and more inclined than ever towards those distractions which his station enabled him to obtain. Had it not been for the Swansdown Hunt Handicap, he told himself, with the excitement of training Potboy, and

riding that game little horse much too frequent gallops, he must have broken his heart.

Being somewhat weak-minded at best, it made less difference to Paravant than to a wiser man that he should have fallen in love. His former occupations still afforded relief, though, like an opium-eater or a dram-drinker, he required the stimulant stronger day by day. When farming grew uninteresting he flew to cricket, and that noble game failing to rouse him, had recourse to racing, a pastime that need never pall, so long as "the shouting of the captains" shall deafen a British public in that hungry institution called the Ring, which flourishes and fattens upon fools.

Paravant was totally without experience, a want that seemed strangely supplemented by unusual luck. Some people think the devil is at the bottom of such crafty arrangements for encouragement of a beginner. Be this as it may, our friend landed more than a hundred pounds in his first attempt at that most hazardous of all guesses, the comparative speed of two inferior racehorses; and having only ventured a modest tenner on his success in the Hunt Handicap, was still in funds, willing to embark in any kind of adventure that promised excitement, even though requiring ready money in exchange. Moreover, he had not forgotten a certain interview in the rectory garden, when that young lady whose proud eyes still haunted him seemed to scorn his quiet, uneventful life, urging him to put out into the stream and take his chance. Well, he was launched now, to some purpose! He had followed her directions implicitly, and for *her* sake too, though she would never know it. Such thoughts, indulged in at sunset, or by moonlight, brought the tears very near his eyes, and for a few thrilling moments he would feel through all his grosser nature a faint reflection of the martyr's loyal flame.

In the meantime, this gipsy seemed to have a splendid voice, and, as far as he could see—for the crush of people prevented his near approach—a handsome face. Though unable to quote that poet, he agreed with Moore that—

> It's a shame, when flowers around us rise,
> To make light of the rest, if the rose be not there;
> And the world is so rich in voluptuous eyes,
> 'Twere a pity to limit one's love to a pair.

So he strolled carelessly towards the singer, unbuttoning

his overcoat, that she might observe the silk jacket underneath.

Trusting to a disguise she had taken infinite pains to prepare, but had not suffered, we may be sure, to dim by one single shade her picturesque beauty, Jane Lee met her former lover without the quiver of an eyelash. He looked paler, she thought, than when they parted; fretting, indeed, and the unromantic effects of Epsom salts, combined with strong exercise, had reduced his weight, as was only fair to Potboy, by the best part of a stone.

What made him start?

She began simply enough, in the regular form: "Have your fortune told, pretty gentleman! Cross the poor gipsy's hand with silver, there's a good gentleman, and she'll tell you your fortune."

Her voice was feigned, and she took care he should see no more of her face than cheek and chin, under her gipsy hat, yet he stood pondering a moment, as if his thoughts were far away. Then pulling his right hand from his pocket, offered it freely for inspection, rings and all.

Bending over the broad, muscular palm, she counterfeited the whine of her people with admirable skill.

"The gipsy could see clearer if 'twas crossed with a bit of silver. Put a bright shilling in your hand, dear gentleman. To give the poor gipsy light. What's a shilling to the like of you?"

He was himself again now, and complied, after a coarse compliment that amused her exceedingly.

"You're a lucky gentleman," she resumed, affecting to study the lines on his hand with close attention. "And so you deserves to be. Lucky when you stays at home, lucky when you walks abroad, lucky when you gets up on horseback, lucky when you sits down to cards, and—no. What's this? Unlucky—bitter unlucky—when you're a-looking for the girl you love!"

He laughed uneasily, but turned pale, and though he muttered, "D——d nonsense!" did not attempt to withdraw his hand.

"It's your star!" she continued. "There's a cloud over it now, but keep a good heart, kind gentleman, it will shine out bright hereafter. Her star is the same as yours, so you're bound to come together. And yet she is crying her dark eyes out this moment for your sake. Ah! she's humble enough to-day, for all her pale, proud face, that

looks as if it couldn't give a tear to any mortal thing. Cross the poor gipsy's hand with another bit of silver, only a little sixpence, kind gentleman, and perhaps I'll tell you more."

Much disturbed, and not entirely free from misgivings that he was tampering with the Evil One, he thrust on her a handful of silver, and bade her in a husky voice, "Finish with what she had to say. He couldn't stand listening to this rubbish all the afternoon."

Bending lower, till the rim of her broad hat touched his wrist, she sank her voice to a whisper that reached no ear but his own.

"The gipsy knows more than you think for, pretty gentleman. She reads the stars, ay, many a time, when you're asleep on your pillow, dreaming of the dark-eyed lass. The stars never tell lies, nor the gipsy neither. They taught me where your spirit was wandering last night—miles and miles away, in a garden of roses, by the side of a tall pale girl, with red flowers at her breast and an open book in her hand"—

"The devil!" he exclaimed, staggered naturally enough by this faithful description.

"On a new-mown lawn, under an old elm-tree," proceeded the sorceress, whose voice was shaking, he believed, under the influence of her familiar spirit. "There was a gentleman waiting outside the garden, a gentleman with a sharp clean-shaved face and a black coat down to his heels. Ah! the stars teach strange things, and tell of strange people. Yes; *he* was Strange too!"

Forward James had good average nerves, but he trembled like a leaf. She seemed to know the very name of his rival. This was the black art with a vengeance! He thought whether he hadn't better offer her a sovereign, and make his escape.

"Don't you be afraid of the poor gipsy," said she, laughing outright; "if she's wiser than you it's for good, not evil. She wouldn't do you harm. Perhaps she can tell you the name of your dark-eyed lass; perhaps it begins with the same letter as luck, and lady, and love!"

He seized her wrist with the grasp of a man thoroughly in earnest.

"If you can tell me where Jane Lee is hidden I'll give you a hundred pounds down. On my honour as a gentleman! In Bank of England notes. I've never had a moment's peace since she went away!"

While he spoke the bell rang to clear the course, and an ebbing wave of humanity, sweeping them to the ropes, brought with it the formidable presence of the patron, by no means sober, linked arm-in-arm with the old gentleman in a long greatcoat, who had never been very far off. Her quick perception took alarm at once.

"You must go now," she whispered, still concealing her face. "Our people are always on the watch. We mustn't be seen together. You don't know the gipsies; how jealous they are, and handy with their knives. If you weren't a young handsome gentleman it wouldn't matter. Listen. Do you want to hear more of Jane Lee? Come to Brimscombe Brake, yonder, at the back of the course, after the next race. Bring your horse. All depends on the stars. I wouldn't say but the dark-eyed lady might be there herself!"

Then she vanished in the crowd, while James Paravant, wondering whether he was awake or dreaming, hastened to an out-building, where his horse had been stabled, to make sure that Potboy was still among the realities of life.

His late companion joined the patron with a frankness of manner that disarmed suspicion, if indeed he entertained any. She did not fail to remark that the old gentleman who accompanied him disappeared at her approach. She wondered, too, at the prolonged absence of Jericho, but gave his doings the less attention that her own thoughts were engrossed elsewhere. If she could get out of the patron's observation for the next half-hour she saw her way to freedom—more, to ease, affluence, and a recognised position in society, could she but play her bold game as boldly as she desired.

At this crisis fortune favoured her more than she had any right to expect, through the pugnacious instincts of Fighting Jack, now more than half drunk.

As they pushed about in the crowd—that old pugilist forcing his way with offensive assumption — they came across a pea-and-thimble man, whose table was about to be wrecked by certain indignant victims of his too-open deceptions. The knave, catching at any excuse to withdraw attention from his roguery, accused Jack of upsetting the board, and thus preventing the payment of two golden sovereigns to a quick-sighted countryman who had discovered the elusive pea.

That successful player,—a tall, broad-shouldered fellow

—irritated by previous failures, bore with some impatience Jack's overbearing demeanour, and proposed, as the gipsy had created all this confusion, he should make good the loss.

At so impossible a suggestion Jack snapped his fingers in the speaker's face, whereat the crowd, exulting in a prospect of gratuitous excitement, crowded round, shouting for "A ring!" and inciting the adversaries to "set to, and have it out like men." The countryman seemed nothing loath.

"Oh! you're one of *that* sort, are you?" said he, squaring up to the gipsy, and aiming at him a blow that would have stunned an ox, neatly stopped by the veteran, who returned like lightning, sending his huge adversary heavily to the ground.

Youth, size, and herculean strength, however, are awkward foes to deal with, for the most accomplished fighter at threescore years of age, and, in his second round, the boxer, whose condition was none of the best, called into play all his former science to keep out of distance while he recovered breath.

"At him, Jack!" urged the excited spectators.

"Ah! that's all very well," replied the old athlete, with grim humour; "I can tell you he's no such catch!"

Meantime, Jane Lee stood rooted to the spot in a paroxysm of fear. Skill, temper, cool courage, and a frame that seemed built expressly for such contests, conquered at last in spite of age, and though the countryman came up time after time bruised, blinded, but full of pluck, he was so obviously worsted that, forgetting the rules of fair play, his friends made in with a rush to his assistance. The bystanders took opposite sides, the crowd increased, and the row became general.

Soon a dozen stalwart policemen were seen moving steadily through the tumult. Women screamed, men swore, staves were drawn, heads broken. Fighting Jack, after a desperate resistance, was taken into custody, and Jane Lee, watching her opportunity, scoured off like a lapwing for Brimscombe Brake.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE HOOK

IT was less than a quarter of a mile from the stand, and by keeping behind certain booths and temporary erections that dotted the racecourse, could be reached almost unobserved ; but her breath came quick, and the handsome girl in gipsy dress looked, as indeed she felt, sorely exercised, both in body and mind, when she reached her goal.

A gentleman-jockey, leading his horse, was there first. Something told him, twenty paces off, before he could peep under her hat, that the woman he loved was coming to him at last. His arms opened instinctively, as she flung herself on his breast, panting, trembling, and, for once, frightened out of her wits.

"You didn't know me! You didn't know me!" she sobbed, between laughing and crying. "Oh, Mr. Paravant, I never thought you would have forgotten me!"

She was so exhausted with her run, so nervous and agitated, that she must have fallen had he not passed his arm round her waist and pressed her to his heart. Such situations inspire confidence, and Forward James, whose bashfulness seemed to have left him, felt wholly equal to the occasion.

"How could I hope to see you again?" said he, smoothing her dishevelled locks with gentle and respectful touch. "At such a place, too, and in such a queer get-up! What does it all mean? Miss Lee, you must let me take you away from here."

"I told you never to say Miss Lee," she answered, with something of the old imperious playfulness that moved him to the core. "What a bad memory you have! Never mind, you were a good boy to do the gipsy's bidding. You may call me Jane now."

"And always?"

"And always, if you want to. Oh, take care! There's sure to be somebody looking!"

Their lips met. For one brief moment James Paravant felt his pulses tingle with the sense of rapture that comes not to men twice in a lifetime. They seem to like it and long for its repetition, looking about in many strange corners to find it again; but there are flowers, and those the sweetest, that yield all their fragrance at a first exhalation, and colours so exquisite that they must fade to coarser and commoner tints even as they touch their brightest and their best. Nothing is without a drawback. Potboy's rein, tugging at his master's elbow, diminished, in some measure, the fulness of delight afforded by this first embrace. The horse, not being in love, wanted to nibble the fresh green leaves, so acceptable after six weeks in training on short allowance of water, with unlimited corn and beans.

"I wish I hadn't brought him," said Paravant. "But you told me—at least I didn't know it was *you*. Shall I turn him loose? He's very much in the way!"

"Turn him loose! Gracious heavens! What are you thinking of? Don't you know why I wanted you to meet me here?"

Dim recollections of Young Lochinvar floated across his mind. With some misgiving he looked at Potboy's saddle, weighing seven pounds, and barely roomy enough for his own manly proportions. She saw and appreciated the difficulty.

"I can ride," said she. "I learnt one Christmas holidays at Brighton, Mr. Paravant—well, James—there's not a moment to lose. They must have missed me already, and will hunt every inch of the racecourse till I'm found. They've seen me come to meet you here. Don't shake your head. I'm not joking. It's murder—*murder*, I tell you, if they ever get me back!"

She was really frightened, though perhaps less so than she seemed; but her pale face and dilated eyes roused all the chivalry of his nature, and he was ready to face the whole Romany nation rather than give her up.

"There would be a fight for it before we came to that," he answered, setting his teeth. "Never mind. Potboy can gallop a bit, though we couldn't win to-day. Do you think you might manage to sit him if I held you on? He won't kick, I know."

"Young Lochinvar"

"Yes! yes! I'll do anything. I'll put my arms round your neck. Only be quick! It's life or death! I'd rather be dashed to pieces than fall into their hands again. Save me! Save me! Here they come!"

Swift and lithe as a serpent, out of the very heather on which they stood, darted the slender form of Jericho, leaving a brown greatcoat and a pair of horn spectacles to mark his lair. The gipsy's dark eyes blazed, froth stood on his lip; but he tried to command his voice while he seized Jane Lee by the wrist, bidding her in a hoarse whisper, "Come back this moment to our people in their tents!"

But Paravant interposed his sturdy person, with riding-whip raised, and one hand on the other's collar.

"Stand off, you hound!" he vociferated. "How dare you touch that lady with your dirty fingers? Back, or I'll flog the life out of you with my whip!"

The gipsy's mouth shut like a clasp, and the white teeth grinned dangerously, while the blade of a long knife flashed in the light, as he brandished it overhead. It was well for James Paravant that he had been reared in a county where the manly art of wrestling is practised even amongst boys at school. His proficiency in this exercise, acknowledged by the low-lived companions with whom he often contended, now stood him in good stead. While Jane Lee, with admirable presence of mind, snatched the bridle from his arm, holding on gallantly to the startled Potboy, and frustrating the horse's efforts at escape, our West-countryman caught his antagonist's wrist with a skilful turn that jerked the knife ten feet in air, then, closing instantly, lifted the gipsy off his feet, and sent him flying over the wrestler's own head, to measure his length, stunned and motionless, on the ground.

One moment he looked at his prostrate foe, who neither spoke nor stirred. "It's a *beautiful* back-fall!" he murmured, "I wish I mayn't have broke his neck!" the next he was in the saddle, showing Jane Lee how to get up by resting her foot on his instep, and so at one nimble spring seating herself on the horse's withers in front of him.

Potboy plunged, the fallen gipsy never moved a finger, and a distant roar from Bellingham's Grand Menagerie announced the approach of feeding-time, advertised for six o'clock.

Jane Lee lost her balance more than once, but the

horse had long free shoulders, behind a muscular neck, and she felt no diffidence in twining her arms round Paravant, as she promised. In a few strides the chestnut seemed reconciled to his double burden, consenting to thread Brimscombe Brake and a gap that afforded egress to the road, at a walk; so that by the time Jericho Lee could rise to a sitting posture, sore all over, with a conviction that the heather beneath him rocked like the deck of a ship, our Young Lochinvar had left Swansdown race-course a league or more behind, and began to wonder what he had better do next.

It was delightful, no doubt, to feel his companion's arms about him, while his breath stirred the soft hair in her neck, but this couldn't go on for ever—not even all night. Potboy was entitled to repose, the lady would require tea, and though, for himself, he was too much in love to care about supper, he felt he should very much like something to drink.

"The horse is quieter than I expected," said she, recovering breath after a gallop of some miles, as the pace calmed down to a walk. "It's a pleasant ride, but where we're going I don't know!"

"And I don't care!" replied her cavalier, "so long as we go together."

"And don't go back," she added. "Do you know, James Paravant, that your courage to-day has saved my life?"

"I always told you I'd plenty of pluck. I don't think you believed it. How you used to bully me! You'll never bully me again?"

"I haven't the right," she whispered gently, yielding, as if she could not help it, to the pressure of his supporting arm.

Even Paravant's inexperience could hardly misinterpret such a hint, so offered. When two people are riding on one horse, moreover, the juxtaposition cannot but impart confidence, and I imagine the use of the pillion by our progenitors afforded facilities for love-making, of which it is a sad pity their descendants should be deprived.

"I mean fair, indeed I do!" he blundered, clumsily enough. "But we can't stay out all night. Will you trust yourself to me?"

"I must," she whispered. "I *will*. I'll do everything you tell me, as if—as if—I belonged to you altogether."

"I will house you in safety to-night," he murmured, "and to-morrow"—

She did not quite catch the rest, drowned in the beat of Potboy's hoofs; for Paravant, perhaps because he could not find words to express his rapture, put the horse into a gallop once more.

It was nearly dark. Stars were already twinkling in the dusky purple overhead. Beneath, a few scattered lights and a bright red spot, marking the head of its harbour, denoted their approach to a seaport town, thriving in sedate commercial prosperity, inhabited by a mercantile population who devoted their whole lives to trade.

It was perhaps the place of all others in which the arrival of such a trio—a sporting-looking man behind a handsome gipsy wench, on a well-bred horse, with its mane plaited—would excite least remark, and Paravant deserved some credit for his selection of such a refuge; but his subsequent proceedings, crafty and well-arranged, originated, I am inclined to think, in the counsels of his companion.

Half a mile from the town they were fortunate enough to overtake an empty fly, lumbering heavily home, and engaged it at once. In this conveyance Jane Lee, screened from observation, followed Potboy and his rider to a livery-stable, with which both seemed well acquainted. Here the former was housed, and the latter got into the fly. This strangely dressed couple were then set down at a milliner's shop, where Paravant could not but admire the readiness with which his companion extricated herself from a false position at the expense of truth. Coolly walking to the counter, she informed a young person there presiding that her carriage had been upset and her horses lamed while returning from an afternoon party at Mrs. Brownrigg's in fancy-dress. Probably they had heard of Mrs. Brownrigg. No? Well, the Park was at some distance. This gentleman fortunately arrived in time to escort her here, for the servants were obliged to stay with the carriage. She wasn't frightened—not a bit—nor hurt; but she had missed her train, and by no possibility could get home to-night. She must sleep in the town, but she couldn't go to a hotel in this masquerading costume, and she wanted some clothes—ready-made, of course—a gown and a decent hat, and a few odds and ends, you know, just for one night.

So plausible a tale impressed and interested the dress-

maker. In less than half an hour, to Paravant's exceeding admiration, his gipsy companion reappeared from a parlour behind the shop, in her original character as Jane Lee.

"But you nearly spoilt it all," she whispered, when they re-entered the fly; "you shouldn't have shown all that money and told me to get a complete fit-out. If she had heard you it would have contradicted my story. You mustn't be so headstrong. Here we are."

Arrived at the archway of the Bull and Bootjack, she placed herself in the landlady's charge at once, ordering a cup of tea, and retiring immediately to her bedroom, on the plea of fatigue after a journey in which she had lost her luggage. Paravant lingered in the passage to wish her good-night, and felt a little disappointed to be put off with only a hand-shake.

"Mayn't I say you're my wife?" he demanded, getting as much warmth as he could into this commonplace ceremony; "that old catamaran will be sure to ask."

"Certainly not," she answered. "Sister if you like. That ought to satisfy anybody."

"My wife to-morrow, then?" he pleaded.

"I can't promise. I have not known you very long. I'm not sure I like you well enough. Yet"— and the cruel door was shut in his face.

But the last monosyllable was as a lump of sugar after a bitter draught, and Paravant descended the stairs to obtain the refreshment of which he stood so much in need, as happy as a king.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LANDING-NET

WHATEVER doubts and uncertainties may have haunted the gentleman's pillow, for with all its fascinations he could not but acknowledge he had embarked on a strange adventure, the lady's mind was made up from the moment she discovered in her assumed character of a fortune-teller that he had never thrown off his allegiance to lost Jane Lee. Entertained for her own sake, there seemed something touching in a stupid, unreasoning fidelity, that she would have ridiculed if cherished for another; and while she could hardly think of one particular in which she would not have liked him to be different, she yet came to the conclusion that there were young gentlemen, in and out of society, who might make worse husbands than Forward James.

As she lay in her roomy four-post bed, so enjoyable after Fighting Jack's scanty resting-place in the caravan, she reviewed her position coolly enough, congratulating herself on the good-luck that offered, and the courage that seized, so unlooked-for a chance of escape. She felt she had been a captive and was comparatively free, at least she would be far more at liberty as Paravant's wife than as Jack Lee's daughter. Mrs. James Paravant! She repeated it in every variety of intonation, without finding one that satisfied her. Perhaps by pronouncing the name like French, something might be made of it—this should be for future consideration. In the meantime, there was no question, it must immediately become her own. Then she thought of Mervyn Strange, his grave face, his deep sad eyes, and the five hundred pounds of which she had shamelessly robbed him. Yes, that was another reason. In a few weeks she would claim her own money, and repay him without its costing her husband a

shilling. Husband! She hated the very word, but there was nothing else for it now!

With a woman's quick perception of the weak point in her natural prey, she felt no misgiving whatever lest Paravant should also show disinclination to lifelong bondage, and take advantage of their unusual situation to avoid so irrevocable a step as legitimate wedlock. Something told her he was fast hooked, and that any attempt at a struggle could be instantly checked by the slightest symptom of disinclination on her own part. Yes, the way seemed plain enough, requiring but a little tact, a little self-command, and the unflinching exercise of a strong, unscrupulous will.

So she remained shut up in her own room the whole morning. He sent several messages by the chambermaid, to tell the lady—he could not bring himself to call her his sister—that he was waiting breakfast, and even pervaded the passage so persistently as to observe tea, toast, pens, ink, and paper taken into the sacred chamber. Sitting down at last, disconsolately enough, to his own lukewarm repast, the waiter brought in a note that robbed him indeed of appetite, but repaid him for his disappointment a hundredfold.

"DEAR FRIEND,"—it began,—"For I suppose I must only call you friend—though your courage and generosity deserve a better title—you asked me a question last night that a woman cannot answer without deep consideration, that, when she *does* answer, one way or the other, decides the whole destiny of her life. What am I to say? What ought I to say? What do I *wish* to say? I examine my own heart again and again, without coming to a satisfactory conclusion. We have known each other only a few weeks—but it is not that. My position here is wretchedly friendless, and entirely false—but it is not that. I have seen very few people, and never *quite cared* for anybody—yet—but it is certainly not that! Why then do I find it so difficult to make up my mind? Sometimes I feel proud and happy, sometimes perplexed and miserable. Can you explain this? I cannot. At whatever decision I arrive, and I think I can guess which way it will be, there is no doubt that you and I must not meet while we remain here. I put it to your own good feeling and sense of right. Supposing—only *supposing*—I ever became your wife, you would like me to have acted as I am acting now. If you were to go away for two days—forty-eight hours, I don't think I could bear it longer—and return with all difficulties smoothed, and everything prepared, I should have time to get some things made, and could consider matters with a clearer head and a quieter heart than at present. I am tired and ill, no wonder, and flurried, and—yes, I will confess it—a little pleased and flattered at somebody's good opinion.

"Adieu then or *au revoir*—at your own option; but believe me, in either case, I shall not forget you, and am, always yours, J. L."

The effect of such a letter on so inexperienced a suitor

need hardly be described. There was just enough love in it to nourish his hopes, enough uncertainty to rouse his fears, and a strain of half-melancholy coquetry, that excited his wishes to the utmost, while affecting to claim protection from his manhood and truth. Forward James was in London the same evening, and back again the next night, with a special licence in his pocket, a plain gold ring—medium size—in his purse, and a steadfast purpose to lead a new life as a respectable member of society in the character of a married man.

The young lady, too, was not idle in this brief interval. Her sex, so full of sweetness and sympathy, take an interest in matrimony, no less general than do sportsmen in the destruction of game. I am aware that, under the usual restrictions of decorum and the crush of business, always urged as an excuse, a bride's trousseau cannot be prepared under six weeks ; but only apply a little unusual pressure, hint at an elopement, a clandestine engagement, or a possibility that the marriage may not come off at all, needles fly like magic, the whole force of the establishment is put on, a score of hands work uninterruptedly for a score of hours, and lo! yards and yards are unrolled of triumphant millinery, light, exquisite, and filmy, as gossamers that dress the meadow on a May morning, and, indeed, little less calculated to last out the wear-and-tear of the day.

When Paravant saw Jane Lee again it was raining in torrents—it rains six days out of seven in this watery corner of the kingdom—but the girl's presence, in white muslin, above all, *without her bonnet*, brought sunshine to his heart. He wondered how he could have borne even two days' absence from this radiant vision ; and, truth to tell, Jane Lee looked remarkably well in a dress that, from its snowy sameness, unrelieved by any spot of colour—for a veil very properly hides their blushes—is a little trying to the majority of brides.

A proud man was Forward James, and a happy, while he followed all this loveliness into a dingy one-horse fly, feeling that, in an hour's time, it would be his own, and for life!

The last consideration afforded him unalloyed satisfaction. That is indeed a cold and unimpressionable nature which can dwell at such a moment on the disappointments and drawbacks of a possible future—change,

misunderstanding, inconstancy, incompatibility, perhaps only weariness, perhaps positive aversion and disgust.

No man worth his salt anticipates evils such as these; and even if they do come, he should remember that compensation is one of the conditions on which we hold life, and that it is something to have felt, if only for an hour, elevated out of self by a pure and ennobling devotion to another.

"You must do without bridesmaids," whispered Paravant, as they stopped at the church-door in a pouring rain, "and the verger will have to give you away; but it's all right. I've got it here, in black and white, from the Archbishop of Canterbury, you know; that's good enough, I hope! Oh! it's a regular lawful marriage, you may be sure!"

She smiled under her veil, wondering whether he really presumed to take credit for not trying to outwit *her!*

Notwithstanding the bridegroom's forethought, however, matters seemed in no advanced state of preparation as this happy couple moved up the nave towards the altar. A damp and mouldy woman was lazily sweeping out a pew; the verger, with his mouth full, had hardly settled himself into a black robe, so fringed and tufted that the mind somehow associated it with a funeral. The vestry-door, standing open, denoted that no clergyman had yet arrived. Rain pattered on the roof, and dashed against a stained-glass window, admitting but little of the dull light afforded by a day more than half-drowned. Paravant began to feel depressed, and even Jane Lee could not help thinking how sadly all this fell short of the ideal wedding she and her schoolfellows used to conjure up at Miss Quilter's, long ago.

Poor Miss Quilter! where was she now?—where were the Tregarthens?—where was everybody?—and what had become of Mervyn Strange?

The vestry-door shut with a bang; there came a firm quick tread, a rustling of garments, a sonorous cough, that seemed familiar to the happy couple, preoccupied as they were.

"This way, if you please," murmured the verger, in a low, respectful tone, suggestive of fees. The old pew-woman, who had never learned to read, put on her spectacles and produced a prayer-book; the bride arranged her veil; the bridegroom pulled down his shirt-cuffs, and both took their places as politely indicated by the verger,

conscious that the coming ceremony was more formidable than they had supposed.

Pale as a ghost, tall and stately in his white surplice, bearing his head aloft and his shoulders squared, like a man who walks bravely to death, the clergyman approached the altar-rails. It is no disparagement to the nerves of the pair about to kneel before him, that one started violently and the other with difficulty repressed a scream. At the same moment they recognised, in the priest who was to unite them for better and worse, none other than the former curate of Combe-Appleton—Mervyn Strange!

He had found time while perusing the licence in his vestry to summon all his manhood, and prepare himself for the ordeal. Who shall measure its severity or gauge the depths of anguish in which his soul was sunk during those moments of torture? The man had plenty of pluck —perhaps he knew where to go and ask for more. But this is a sacred subject, on which it becomes us not to dwell.

Of the three hearts beating before that communion-table, the saddest was the steadiest and the most composed.

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" His voice came calm and firm, he showed no more symptoms of emotion than the verger himself, who accepted that responsibility without scruple. He went through the service quietly and soberly to the end, nor winced at its noble promises marvellously expressed, its touching obligations solemnly enjoined; but he addressed himself solely to the bridegroom, keeping his eyes averted from the bride's face.

More than once his heart rebelled at the chance that had thrust on him this painful task. He had not been here a month, having sought a curacy that offered abundance of hard, self-denying work, when he resigned, as he felt incumbent on him, his engagement with Mr. Tregarthen. To-day, too, it was not his turn to take such duties as might offer—there seemed a fatality in his rector's absence, and the sudden indisposition of a brother-curate occurring, as it seemed, purposely, to stretch him on the rack at a moment's notice.

Fatality! No. It was part of his punishment. He must accept and bear it as best he might.

The worst was yet to come. Entering the vestry for

certain necessary formalities, Paravant hung back to refresh two willing palms with injudicious liberality, and for a minute Mervyn Strange was alone with Jane Lee!

Stay! Not Jane Lee. She was Mrs. Paravant now. This morning it seemed only misery, through which shone gleams of happiness, to recall her image, and lo! in ten minutes, to think of her had become mortal sin. How beautiful she looked in that white veil, with her glorious eyes and wreaths of bright black hair! Why was he to be punished like this?

She bent those glorious eyes on his own, and for the first time he forced himself to meet them.

"Can you forgive me?" she murmured.

"From my heart. I have blessed you as a priest. As a man, I pray humbly and heartily that you *may* be blessed!"

"And the money?" She blushed to her temples. "Indeed, I mean to be honest and pay every farthing. I ought never to have taken it."

He smiled kindly, yet with something of scorn.

"You have taken everything," he said, "and you are welcome! A man can but give his all. God bless you, and farewell!"

Book III

CHAPTER XXV

LAUNCHED

"WHO the deuce is this chap with three greys and a chestnut? Not much of a coachman, I should say. Don't remember seeing him before."

"I'm surprised. I should have thought *you* were sure to know him. That's the man with the handsome wife—the woman they call Beltenebrosa."

"What a long word! Sounds like the name of a race-horse. Why do they call her that?"

"Because she's as black as your hat—well, not yours, for it's a white one, but mine—and as handsome as the Queen of Sheba."

"Never saw the Queen of Sheba. There's a picture of her in the Academy, that looks like a mulatto in drink. Is that What's-her-name on the box? By Jove, she is a good-looking one!"

"I told you so. Wait till you've seen her in a room. I am not easily bowled over. I wish I were! but she staggered *me*."

"Why, where did you meet her? What a rum fellow you are! You find out people in the four corners of the earth."

"This was in the fifth, called Hyde Park Corner, or very near it. I met her on Sunday, at Lisbon's. He brings out a new beauty every year."

"Was the husband there?"

"Of course. What do you take me for?"

"Has he got a name too? Hers ought to be enough for both."

"His name is Paravant, but he's an Englishman. Now, I believe she is a foreigner. At least she gives out she was born a Beltenebrosa. I'm not sure she don't put it on her cards."

"And what is the husband?"

"Rather a count, and rather a cub; but not half a bad fellow; hasn't two ideas, and can ride like a bird."

"You seem to be in with the lot."

"Not I; but she's so good-looking, one's bound to be civil to *him*. It's rather a tax. I sometimes think I like ugly women best. They're so much less trouble!"

"All tastes are to be respected," observed his friend, and the pair strolled off in different directions, to say the same things to the same people, just as they did yesterday and will to-morrow, and so on, with but little variety till after Goodwood.

But one of these, the last speaker, had determined to become better acquainted with the dark face that roused his interest more than he chose to admit in conversation with his companion. Lord St. Moritz was a sincere admirer of beauty, surrendering, with touching helplessness, at the very first shot. Considerate, affectionate, devoted, and unexacting, he would have been a pattern lover, but for one serious drawback. His constancy was so far to be calculated on, that he never failed to succumb under a new temptation. A widower, and past forty, he seemed easily captured as a boy; and, notwithstanding his varied experience, was a slave to woman—or I should rather say, a slave to *women*—still.

With less trouble than he usually had to take, he discovered the private history of the Paravants, as imparted on their own authority to the world, in the following problematical version:—

"The husband was a county gentleman of ancient lineage, owning large estates in Normandy, the Channel Islands, and at the Land's End. He had spent much of his life abroad—where, two years ago, he met with his present wife under most romantic circumstances—in the Pyrenees, the Tyrol, the Styrian Alps. She was a Hungarian, an Italian, a Moorish Spaniard, a nun in her year of probation, a Levantine Greek; but her family name was Beltenebrosa, and she claimed to be a countess in her own right. Lisbon had been everywhere; he knew them on the Continent; he helped Paravant to carry her off from her convent. She was his illegitimate sister; his first wife's niece; his own natural daughter. At anyrate he vouched for them, and that was enough! Lisbon was known in every capital; received at every court in Europe;

had the international scandals of all societies at his fingers'-ends; and if these people were not presentable, would have been sure to find it out."

Deep mourning? Yes. That was for *his* mother—an American lady—a Russian—an Armenian Jewess. She had left some enormous addition to his fortune, already large enough. One don't believe half one hears, and, of course, one can't be too particular; but, really, these are people one ought to know, and if they seem to "get on" at all, one must certainly call!

Thus the world. And, wonderful to say, with one grain of truth in its confused medley of conjecture. Paravant's mother really did die a few weeks after his marriage, making him a richer man than before by some hundreds a year, and affording a sufficient reason for that long winter's seclusion, on which his wife laid great stress, as a first necessity for the future development of her plans.

These she explained one December afternoon, with the Mediterranean lipping their feet, calm, soft, and grey as the sky under which it slept, and a dim curl of smoke high in the distant heaven, that it required a second look to identify rising from the crest of Etna, lost among streaks of cloud.

"It's slow, dear, and stupid enough, I grant you. But after all, it's no worse for you than for me. Do you hate it so very much?"

This was the way to take him, and the lover was hardly yet lost in the husband, so we need not wonder at his answer.

"How can I hate it when you are with me? Only, there's nothing to do, and I can't get any decent cigars!"

"We will remedy both those grievances. I'll write to your tobacconist at once, and as for something to do—why, you shall do lessons with me—there!"

He made a long face, and she continued merrily—

"Don't be afraid. I'm not going to scold if you're a good boy. But, seriously, you ought to pick up some French — it's useful in society — and a few words of Italian, if only to swear at Giacomo when he drives us out!"

"That's a temptation! I should swear a great deal. It's no relief when they don't understand you!"

"A little occupation makes the time pass. In three months we may quite well go to England."

"And then?"

"Then you must do every earthly thing I tell you, and we shall have what people call a success. I don't mean to give out that I am a gipsy foundling, and you are a small Somersetshire squire."

He winced.

"The Paravants are a very old family," said he; "they came in at the Conquest."

"So are the gipsies," she answered, laughing. "Old enough, but by no means respectable. Never mind! I've great faith in names. Yours, when properly pronounced, has quite a Norman ring in it. I shall put on my cards, Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa!"

"*Neigh!*"—for so he spelt it in his own mind—"what does *neigh* mean? And as for the other word, Bel—how much? I can't say it."

"Then you must learn. It's a foreign fashion, announcing that a lady retains her own rank after marriage. With my black face, particularly if you swear at me in Italian now and then, I shall go down well enough as the signora. It means nothing here, but they like it in London. I have made up my mind we are to perch at the top of the tree."

He shook his head.

"That's not so easy."

"It is, if we go in for being half foreigners. First of all, people want to know *who* you are, then they like to seem to know and tell each other. This ensures exaggeration, both of rank and fortune. Presently we shall make acquaintance with somebody — anybody — and be asked somewhere — anywhere. After that, it will be our own fault if we ever dine with a commoner again!"

"How so?"

"My dear, it's the simplest thing in the world. London fish swarm to the same fly. The bait that takes a minnow takes a salmon. It's just as easy to leave your card on a duchess as on her next-door neighbour, and she will be just as anxious to know you if she can't make out who on earth you are. *Madame Paravant, née Beltenebrosa!* What a name for the servants to take up, and what a hash they will make of it! You must be very bluff and English —that won't trouble you much—and I must be rather distant and foreign. They'll invent impossible romance

for us themselves. Everybody will be dying to know the Paravants, and all the women will fall in love with you."

"And the men with you!"

"That's likely enough, and, let me tell you, it's a great help, particularly if *you* seem very fierce and jealous. What fun! I can see it all, like something on the stage."

He did not quite fancy this part of her programme, and changed the subject.

"We'll go home first," said he. "I should like a look round the farm."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. We must arrive in London with the breath of the sea fresh on us—you know what I mean. When we are once established, we can go to Somersetshire, or elsewhere, as we please."

"And the poor horses?"

"Have them up to town. That reminds me—you must make up a team, and drive a coach. Nothing ensures a certain position so quick. Four horses, all out of the stable at once, means ten thousand a year!"

He stared.

"How did you find that out? You seem to know as much of life as a man."

"Do you think girls at school keep their eyes shut?" she replied. "Why, at Miss Quilter's we used to watch the drags pass every day they went out. I could have told you the names of more than half the gentlemen who drove. We could see them quite plain from our garden."

"Upon my word! And could they see you?"

"Oh yes. Some of them used to take their hats off, and one day, Curly—we called him Curly because we couldn't find out his real name—threw a nosegay in, right over the wall."

"To *you*, I suppose?"

"I don't think so. Annie Macpherson picked it up and kept it in water for a fortnight. She told Miss Quilter it came from her grandpapa!"

"That was a lie. Used you all to tell lies?"

"Only white ones. I don't think one ought ever to tell a story—a real downright falsehood—unless there is no other possible way out of the difficulty."

"And then you consider it right?"

"Oh, I don't know. Everybody does it, but I hate

arguing. Let's go home through the olives, and down by the Wooden Cross."

The result of such conversations as the foregoing was the appearance of James Paravant, early in May, on that well-appointed coach, with its quick-stepping team, that provoked the criticisms of Lord St. Moritz and his friend.

Where horses were concerned, to do him justice, the Somersetshire squire was seldom at a loss. A little morning practice before the world had breakfasted made him thoroughly at home on his box, and though Potboy proved a most erratic leader, driven on either side, Forward James soon began to thread the crowd of carriages that block the Park on a summer's afternoon, with as few bumps and casualties as the best. His team were showy and well-bred, properly put together, which is half the battle. Thanks to his wife's supervision, his own get-up was irreproachable, and before that handsome woman had been seen beside him on his coach a dozen times, both driving-clubs were prepared to elect him a member without a single black ball.

She had not miscalculated the effect of her foreign appellation and striking appearance. Everything turned out as she expected. Paravant's driving, with a courteous pull-up or two at critical moments, obtained him some introductions, these led to others, and as every young gentleman felt bound to make acquaintance with the handsome signora, enterprising spirits threw themselves in her husband's way for the purpose. Two claimants for notice yesterday, increased to a dozen to-day, and doffings of hats, once so prized, became valueless when multiplied by scores. Soon people began to leave off asking who was this Madame Beltenebrosa—it seemed such a solecism not to know; and when Paravant's coach stood at Hyde Park Corner, dandies swarmed and clung about it from roof to roller-bolt, like barnacles under the water-line of a rickety old ship homeward bound.

Every man brought his tribute. An order for this, a ticket for that; stalls at the opera, unaccountably at liberty; a box for the French play; racing intelligence to interest the husband, scandal and tittle-tattle to amuse the wife, with whom Prance, of the Foreign Office, commonly called the "Molecatcher," loved to converse in his own peculiar Italian, affording, I imagine, more

amusement than he intended, to a lady who herself spoke the language fluently and well.

As the inclemency of May seemed to give a little, and the sun shone out with promise of summer for an hour or two, dinners were arranged at Hurlingham, the Orleans Club, Ranelagh, and such suburban resorts frequented by those who are without engagements elsewhere, and who, perhaps simply because they are not asked, would rather be dining in Belgrave Square. These entertainments were much to Paravant's taste: the tone was sporting and not too exclusive, the wine moderate but plentiful, and he could smoke directly after dinner. Beltenebrosa, too, as she began to be called, accepted the hospitalities thus offered, with a calm and gracious dignity, as a foretaste of those more patrician banquets—less easy, less airy, and in every respect less agreeable—of which she intended hereafter to be the ornament. She knew no ladies as yet —that she must arrange for herself, the men could do little for her there; and she resolved from the first, with considerable worldly knowledge, to eschew those doubtful dames who are neither quite in nor quite out of society, but who have a deal of fun, and drive many a successful foray in a certain Debatable Land of their own between the borders of "found charming" and "found out." Therefore, Beltenebrosa's voice was low, her manner exceedingly calm and quiet. No flashes of Southern sentiment, no bursts, no Southern mirth; above all, no symptoms of gratification in flattery the most delicate, homage the most profound. These things ought to be accepted as a matter of right, and nobody should ever hint she was bad style!

The younger men, professing to understand women thoroughly, confessed themselves at a loss. Coolly and courteously she thanked them for dinners, orders, tickets, and so forth. Equally coolly, equally courteously, without surprise, remonstrance, disapproval, or emotion of any kind, she declined bouquets, gloves, knick-knacks, table-ornaments, any article bought in a shop, or that could in any way suggest the possibility of value received. "She's as proud as Lucifer," said one. "That's the old Genoese blood," asserted another. "I think the husband won't stand it," opined a third; while little Sinnick, fresh from Eton, at one end of a cigar as big as himself, pronounced sententiously—

"You fellows know nothing about it. I spotted her at once. She's a sensible, strong-minded woman. Lots of intellect, you know, but not a particle of heart!"

Triumphs accepted so sedately caused her husband no uneasiness, and perhaps this was the happiest period in Paravant's life. They stayed at a hotel, for she shrewdly observed that might mean anything, from Belgrave Square to Chapel Street, if they had chosen to take a house; and, as he had not yet seen the bill, London seemed a remarkably cheap place to live in. Being well able for the present to pay ready money, tradesmen were obstinate in supplying them with articles of every description on credit; their acquaintance increased; the horses kept sound; the weather improved; and Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa—a title he mastered after many repetitions—though not demonstratively affectionate, was always the same.

Forward James found it a pleasant world, and said so, protesting humbly and honestly that he owed his enviable position entirely to his wife.

CHAPTER XXVI

A FOLLOWING WIND

LORD ST. MORITZ, when he hunted a fresh distraction, did not allow the grass to grow under his feet; and the first time he met Prance in St. James's Street, hooking him by the arm, he accompanied that gratified young gentleman to the very corner of Pall Mall, and never let go, although a royalty, two Cabinet ministers, and Prance's own chief spoke to his lordship during their walk. Arrived at Sam's, he stopped as if he had just remembered something of no consequence.

"Molecatcher," said he carelessly, "you know everybody. I see you talking to that Madame Beltenebrosa in the Park—I mean a black woman who belongs to a man with a coach. I wish you would introduce me."

"To the black woman, or the man with the coach?" asked Prance jauntily, as he conceived, with the air of a consummate fine gentleman.

"Oh, the husband of course. I must have met her people abroad, and I ought to be civil. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to interfere with you."

The Molecatcher assented cordially; quoted "St. Moritz" to everybody he met during the afternoon, and, it is to be presumed, fulfilled his engagement; for at 6.30 p.m. the same day his lordship was to be seen sitting behind "the black woman," making himself exceedingly agreeable to "the man with the coach."

"That's the best fellow we've come across yet," said the husband, driving leisurely home through Stanhope Gate. "And a capital judge of a horse. Spotted Potboy in a moment. Saw at once he could gallop like smoke. Not at all a stuck-up chap, neither, and plenty to say."

"Very likely," answered his wife. "You had all the benefit. He said nothing to me." And, indeed, she was revolving in her own mind why this man of all others

should have seemed undisturbed by her beauty, and negligent in offering the tribute of admiration to which she was getting so accustomed now, she claimed it as her due.

That night at the French play, which Paravant considered and declared "infernal rot," she thought of Lord St. Moritz again, wondering whether he would be there; then—why he was *not*. Altogether he came into her mind three or four times before she went to bed, which was exactly what he intended.

Next day Paravant vanished immediately after breakfast with his new friend to attend a sale of yearlings, and Beltenebrosa, for the first time since she arrived in London, was left by herself. Young Prance, indeed, called, to be succeeded by more of his kind; but she found them insufferably stupid and wearisome. Her gipsy blood grew restless, and she was beginning to fret for some fresh excitement, when the absentee returned, bringing with him his lordship, to whom he offered cooling drinks of every kind, and eventually tea.

"Certainly not," protested Lord St. Moritz, laughing. "I should drink a farthing's-worth, and the hotel would charge you a shilling! I cannot encourage such extravagance. No; if Madame Beltenebrosa did not think it would bore her, I should like to offer you both tea at Hurlingham. My barouche is at the door. We can drive down in half an hour, and by that time it will be cool and pleasant under the trees. What does Madame say?"

Madame would like it very much. Madame consented with more animation than usual. Madame had been conjugating a French verb all day—"*je m'ennuie, tu t'ennuies*," and so on. Lord St. Moritz probably didn't know the meaning of the word.

Didn't he? Lord St. Moritz had been repeating it all his life—particularly when alone with Lord St. Moritz. Few things amused—nothing interested—him except tea, and Hurlingham, and agreeable company like the present; but while he took his seat in his own carriage, with his back to the horses, this incorrigible nobleman reflected that there were more verbs than *s'ennuyer* in the French grammar which so handsome a woman might learn to conjugate under his instruction, with much satisfaction to himself.

The closest friendships, I think, begin by imperceptible

"When shall I see you again?"

degrees, and the same may be said of attachments. Beltenebrosa found Lord St. Moritz a more agreeable companion than any of her captives; but, as she had no hesitation in saying so, I conclude the impression he made must have been on her intellect, rather than her heart. Yet their intimacy was so gradual in its progress, she found it impossible to record the different stages by which distant civility grew to frank courtesy, then warm friendship, tender interest, and— What was it at the end of a fortnight? Something very like devotion on one side, and compassion, if nothing kinder, on the other.

He made a great stride in her good graces, and he knew it, by a delicate attention, delicately paid, which cost him more trouble, and to use his own words, forced him "to eat more dirt" than she supposed.

They were sitting on penny chairs under a noonday sun, in the Park, Paravant being engaged with an equestrian at the rails. Her parasol was up. It shaded his lordship's white hat, and her own black head. In the crush of a London season few couples can hope to be more alone than this.

"When shall I see you again?" asked the hat of the parasol in a low voice that trembled, or seemed to tremble a little with the simple question. "Are you going to-morrow to Lady Goneril's?"

"You may be sure I'm not," answered the parasol, unfurled and defiant. "I don't know her. I don't know any of these ladies who give things!"

"Would it amuse you?"

"Shall *you* be there?"

"Thanks! Then I'm only amusing, after all. And I wanted to be interesting. How you pitch into one sometimes!"

"I don't. It would hurt my own knuckles. Again, I say, Are you going? I don't care about the rest."

"I'll go if you will. Now, *will* you, if she sends an invitation?"

"I'll see. Don't look so meek. When I say 'I'll see,' that means, 'I'll consider.' When people consider"—

"They end by doing whatever they like best. *Be* considerate, and say you'll go—at once. Here's Paravant."

There must have been some tacit agreement that Lady Goneril's invitation would be accepted, or Lord St. Moritz need not have embarked with so much energy

on an undertaking that required tact, temper, and a certain subtlety to carry out.

There is nothing about which London ladies are so touchy as their invitations. No conceivable request receives so hearty a rebuff as that for a ball-ticket, and the most daring of admirers can hardly be repulsed more brusquely than the injudicious visitor who presumes on a lifelong friendship to implore a card for a third person, well known to both. Nobody understood these matters better than Lord St. Moritz; but he laid his plans with a thorough knowledge of the ground on which he was working, and consequently with a fair chance of success.

Calculate on a woman's liking for a man, and you are deceived in a hundred ways. Modesty, pique, the spirit of contradiction, a host of such difficulties rise up to baffle you at every turn; but you may always depend on her hatred of another woman, and in this respect alone can make sure of finding the softest female hearts turn to adamant itself.

St. Moritz, in furtherance of his schemes, caused his brougham to set him down at the portals of a house like a palace, where, once a fortnight, during the London season, a crowded "at home" collected "everybody" who was "anybody," at some hour of the night between eleven and two. He was as sure of finding Lady Goneril on the marble staircase—still handsome, still hungry for admiration, frizzed, painted, powdered, and with a train seven feet long—as he was of the beautiful hostess to whom he made his bow, receiving in return a quiet but sincere welcome, the perfection of refinement, good-breeding, and feminine grace.

Now Lady Goneril was Lord St. Moritz's last love *but one*, and though she had long since appointed his successor, retained certain kindly inclinations towards the only man in her whole experience who had used her shamefully ill.

This feeling, however, was not to be compared with the aversion she cherished for Mrs. Stripwell, the lady who supplanted her, and whom she naturally supposed to be his lordship's present proprietor. That she still felt when she met him what she called a *serrement de cœur*—so universal and uncomfortable a qualm that it need not be construed into English—afforded her the utmost satisfaction. It was at least a sensation, and as such she made it welcome.

"My dear," she would say to intimate friends, "there is

always some good left in a woman who can *feel*. I had rather know I am wretched than be without sentiment altogether, like a brick wall, or a stone chimney-piece, or that odious little spit-fire, Mrs. Stripwell."

Lord St. Moritz, looking very cool and gentlemanlike, with his crush-hat pressed against his heart, found her ladyship in the very spot he expected, and, accosting her almost affectionately, was accorded a gracious reception. After such customary greetings as "How well you're looking!" and "What nonsense!" which mean a great deal or nothing at all, she tossed her head, flirted her fan, cleared for action, in short, and started with the apposite inquiry, "Well, how's the Pigmy? She's not coming here to-night, I know, because she's not asked!"

It was her whim, while admitting the indisputable symmetry of her figure, to decry Mrs. Stripwell's low stature. Lady Goneril herself stood five feet eight inches, full-limbed and well set up, but developing into what is called a "magnificent woman" with alarming rapidity.

"I know she's not, or I shouldn't have come."

Her fan opened and shut with a triumphant flourish.

"What do you mean? Have you had a row? I warned you of her temper. These little women are always tartars!"

"Why do you talk as if she was a dwarf? Chiselli swears she is exactly the size of Canova's Venus, and as well made."

"I wonder how he knows? But it's very easy to have a good figure if one is only two foot high—you used to admire tall women."

"So I do," said he, thinking of Beltenebrosa, but affording Lady Goneril much satisfaction by the admission.

"Well?" she continued. "Go on; there's been a quarrel, I see. You surely haven't come to *me* to make it up!"

"I come to you because I'm annoyed. I think I have a right to be. I want to ask your opinion. It's a question of feeling; and I'm sure, Lady Goneril, you have a good heart."

"No, I haven't. I had once. Never mind, that's past and done with. Take me to the tearoom, and tell me all about it."

As they threaded the crowd arm-in-arm, intending deserters looked guiltily on faces where they owed allegiance, while ladies who had no reason as yet to expect disloyalty

cast approving glances on a companionship that argued the renewal of bonds sadly strained, if not actually snapped; but nobody made any verbal remark. It is not the custom of good society.

Scandals which have no real existence are proclaimed by a thousand tongues, but a discreet silence is observed in well-bred circles on matters which may be deprecated and deplored, but cannot admit of doubt. Neither do people in London catechise us on our future movements, and past performances, so severely as do our country friends. I hope it is not because, judging from their own observation and experience, they have decided our conduct will not bear too close investigation!

In the tearoom, fifty feet long, were but four other couples, wholly engrossed with their own affairs. In such a retreat and behind such a fan as Lady Goneril's, they could hardly have been more alone in the Moor of Rannoch, the morning-room at White's, the upper end of Wimpole Street, or any other solitude you like to mention. Lord St. Moritz made his plunge.

"Don't you think, when a man has devoted himself to one lady for more than three months, she ought to make *some* sacrifice for his sake?"

"Good gracious, no! What an odd question!"

"Then we differ. Probably I am wrong, and yet I believe, if I were to ask you to drive three yards down a street, and leave cards at a door, you wouldn't tell me, in polite language, you would see me hanged first!"

"How like her!" exclaimed Lady Goneril, jumping to a conclusion at once, and forgetting the *esprit de corps* on the calling question, very strong among ladies of her calibre, in the delight of reviling and possibly discomfiting a rival. "Didn't I always tell you she has no more heart than—a—*man!*"

"I begin to think you must be right, and yet she looks so soft and gentle. I wonder what it was in her that made a fool of me. Upon my word, I sometimes begin to believe in magic. Ah! I wish I could live the last year over again."

"I wish we all could. And yet, I daresay it would bore us. Well, go on."

"There are some people from the West of England I wish to be civil to. I don't suppose you ever heard of them. A Mr. and Mrs. Paravant. They know positively

nobody, and I have reasons for wanting to do *him* a turn, so I asked Mrs. Stripwell to leave her card, and she positively refused."

"I have heard of them. A vulgar man with a vulgar wife, who sets up for a beauty. I haven't seen her. *Is* she handsome?"

"Yes. You can't help admitting it. But much too dark. Almost like the gipsies you see at Ascot."

Lady Goneril reflected. These swarthy beauties certainly never were to his taste. Her own locks had been successfully gilt for so long, she hardly remembered their natural shade, but her eyes were grey and eyebrows brown, when she let them alone. Mrs. Stripwell, too, though figure was her strong point, had a pretty little innocent red and white face, surmounted by a touzle of hair like fluffy yellow silk. These considerations decided her ladyship. She became a partisan at once.

"Would you like me to send her a card for to-morrow? It's one of my *omnium gatherums*. She would meet lots of people. And after all, it commits one to nothing."

He was cunning enough to affect a hesitation which clenched the business.

"I don't know," said he doubtfully. "It's very kind of you, dear Lady Goneril. Nobody is so good a friend. But—it would distress poor Mrs. Stripwell sadly. She has chosen to set her face against those people, and will take it dreadfully to heart if she meets them at any *good* places —like yours, for instance. I shouldn't wonder if it made her ill!"

Beltenebrosa coming down to breakfast next morning, was more surprised than we need be by a square envelope lying on her plate, which, being torn open, disclosed a large card, intimating the certainty of finding Lady Goneril in her own house at a given time. This was followed later in the day by three smaller tickets, representing a personal visit from herself and a gentleman then at Cowes, whom she was good enough to call her lord.

CHAPTER XXVII

A FLOOD-TIDE

THERE is many a progress in which, as in walking with your head under your arm, the first step is more than half the battle.

Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa, was admitted, literally by acclamation, to be the handsomest woman in Lady Goneril's drawing-room; and, indeed, with a shade more colour, would have been acknowledged the beauty of the season. Everybody asked to be introduced, even the ladies, who, seeing how it set, thought well to swim with the tide. Prance received three invitations to dinner, solely in virtue of his acquaintance with such a paragon. An illustrious personage stood by her side nearly five minutes, offering with admirable tact the homage of a gentleman, rather than displaying the condescension of a prince. "Black but comely" was the verdict of his equerry; and by one o'clock in the morning every soul in the room had become, or tried to become, acquainted with Madame Beltenebrosa.

Lady Goneril, indeed, would have wished she had not asked her, but for the mortification she desired to inflict on Mrs. Stripwell, also invited (for sufficient reasons), though an enemy. That provoking little woman, however, appeared thoroughly unconscious of the annoyance; flirting, according to custom, with a succession of admirers in regular rotation, calm, self-possessed, and cool as a cucumber, partly from temperament, partly from the shape and texture of her dress — delicate, transparent, and cut exceedingly low. She yawned at intervals, nevertheless, and looked round more than once as if for somebody who never came.

That somebody was ten miles off, dining sedately at Richmond, after a pull on the river with two old Eton friends. His absence was by no means accidental, but

rather the result of studied calculation. He reflected that, on Beltenebrosa's first appearance in the *real* London world, her attention would be necessarily engrossed by the novelty of such a situation, and amongst so many fresh triumphs, an admirer of yesterday, however deserving, would be at a disadvantage. There is no position so difficult to maintain as the proprietorship, in any degree, of an acknowledged beauty. That discomfort he resolved should fall to Paravant, who had a legal right to it; and a cigar by moonlight on a terrace overlooking the river, was surely better pastime than a succession of spasmodic efforts to hold his own against the most dangerous competitors in the land, all of whom had the odds of novelty in their favour. To-morrow, *he* would be a fresh excitement in his turn. At this moment she was surely wondering what had become of him; piqued, no doubt, and even a little angry at his desertion. "For," argued his lordship, "women are so insatiable, that ninety-nine captives lose something of their value when one more is wanting to make up the hundred, and I daresay, if the truth were known, she misses me at this moment as much as I do her!"

The old campaigner was little out in his reckoning. There were three women watching the door for him that night, with uneasy hearts, though different degrees of interest. Lady Goneril was more vexed than disappointed, because, as she said to herself, "It's so like him, one never knows what he will do next!" Mrs. Stripwell felt surprised to find she cared for him so much, and regretted, absolutely regretted, she had put on this most attractive of all her dresses, instead of the lilac, that came up an inch higher, and became her beauty a shade worse; while Beltenebrosa, through all her triumph, in the consciousness that her foot was on the ladder at last, felt with a twinge, keen enough to be painful, how much she missed the quiet, amusing, half-caustic, half-indulgent mentor, who told her all about everybody, with something good, bad, and indifferent, but generally untrue, to say of each.

A fourth person was also most uncomfortable, as being thoroughly out of his element. Paravant would have felt much happier with St. Moritz at his elbow, for that gentleman, who possessed no scruples, but much tact, never allowed his new acquaintance to discover he was "not in the swim," and treated him with all the deference to which

Forward James thought himself entitled ; whereas, to-night, nobody took much notice of him, and but for Prance, who had compassion at intervals, he would have been a hermit in a crowd. Our friend did not at all fancy being neglected, and was by no means disposed to sink without protest into a mere supernumerary, as the husband of Madame Beltenebrosa. For the first time since their marriage, he showed symptoms of ill-humour going home.

"I don't think much of these drums, as they call them," said he, flouncing into his corner of the brougham with some petulance. "There's no fun in them—no dancing, no life, no *go!* I shan't come again ; I'd much rather have been smoking a cigar outside."

But Beltenebrosa, flushed with conquest, could by no means agree.

"They are a necessity of one's position, my dear," she replied, smiling inwardly at the airs she was assuming. "They lead to everything else, you know. Of course it's stupid, but one mustn't mind that."

"Stupid! You didn't seem to think it stupid. I was wondering what you could find to jabber about. I didn't know you liked to have a lot of stuck-up chaps bothering and talking no end of rot, and what I call standing on their hind-legs for you ; I thought you were a different kind of woman altogether."

"So I am, dear," she replied, in perfect good-humour. "I'm sure I was much happier in Italy than you were; but if we had been at Rome, we should have done like the people at Rome. Of course, with royalty, and all that, one must be as pleasant as one can. I'm sorry you found it a bore."

He was still a little in love, so only grumbled a few disjointed murmurs about "conceited asses" and "London assurance," ending with a declaration that "he should like to go home to Somersetshire at once."

"So we will, dear," she assented ; "nothing will please me better—after Ascot."

"Ascot!" he repeated, aghast. "You surely don't want to go to Ascot?"

"I suppose we must. His Royal Highness seemed to think it a matter of course. He told me Vermuth was sure to win the Cup. Yes, dear, I must take you to Ascot, if only as a question of business."

"How?"

"Well, you know, people can't live as we are doing without spending money. The hotel bills will run up to something frightful, and four horses don't stand at livery for nothing."

"Besides your dresses. They cost more than the horses, I'll be bound."

"Besides my dresses—yes, we shall want all the ready money we can lay our hands on. Now, you understand racing thoroughly, don't you?"

"Well, I think I'm as wide awake as my neighbours. The sharpest of 'em must get up pretty early to put *me* in the hole!"

He spoke in a tone of confidence that would have warmed the cockles of a ringman's heart; for those, I imagine, that lay claim to the wisdom of the serpent are the most profitable kind of doves; and his wife, with a twinge of conscience, as she remembered the five hundred pounds, long since spent, and still owing to Mervyn Strange, persuaded herself that the acuteness he professed might be turned to some account.

"Then we will go to Ascot," said she pleasantly, "like the rest of the world. I shall only want two new dresses, and you might send the team down and drive it to the course. I'll find out all about that. I've been promised tickets for the enclosure. I've done *my* share. I leave you to get a hint about the racing—what you call the straight tip. I never meddle with matters I don't understand."

She had wheedled him into good-humour.

"Quite right," said he; "you've got that pretty head of yours screwed on the right way after all. Here we are. Now for a B-and-S, one quiet cigar, and then bed!"

But over that cigar Paravant reflected more than in any previous meditations since his marriage. His life seemed running into a groove very different from that which he would have chosen for himself. The future he used to paint was perhaps in no way more domestic than his present career, but the central figure of its grouping was his own, not his wife's. He had hoped for sporting triumphs and social successes easily obtained near his rustic home. To be reckoned the fastest young fellow in the county—who had run off with the handsomest woman; a good shot; a thorough sportsman; owner — perhaps rider—of a winner at Swansdown Races: such were the

milder glories that would have satisfied his ambition and cost him but little effort to attain. Now he seemed embarked on far more hazardous courses, though he could not deny they lay altogether in a loftier sphere. He was playing higher stakes, and with less certainty of winning. In the society to which his wife's beauty gave him access, he already discovered that he must *do* something and *be* something himself if he would not sink into the mere appendage of a woman's belongings. His brief experience of life had already shown him men accepted, even caressed, by the world for no good quality or merit whatever, but a happy knack of possessing, perhaps only of backing, winning horses, and, what such speculators could do well, he was vain enough to believe he could do better!

"Yes, she's right enough," he said to himself, drinking off his B-and-S at one defiant gulp: "Ascot is the best plan after all. Let me only see them gallop down the course, and I flatter myself I can spot the winner as fast as the numbers go up; otherwise, what's the use of a good eye for make and shape, and a memory that seldom plays me false? I remember her saying once 'It's as easy to catch a salmon as a sprat.' The same holds good with racing. If you're not out in a thirty-pound selling-plate you may make a good shot at the Ascot Cup. I was never afraid to back my opinion. Yes, we *will* go to Ascot; and it's very strange if I don't come back with something like a thou. to the good!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

CARRYING ON

A LONDON season soon slips away. Town never seems really full till just before the Derby; then comes a week of clouds and rain, spent in exchanging meteorological lamentations and hopes for a change, dinners, plays, balls, receptions, and, lo! Ascot is upon us before we have time to turn round. That pleasant gathering, and the Whitsuntide holidays, empty the Park of its surplus and fill a good many country houses to overflowing; but with the hot weather people return to crowded staircases and suffocating dinners, till startled by questions concerning Goodwood—premonitory symptoms of the end. Presently cabs, piled with luggage, are to be seen in greater numbers day by day. Leaves droop in the squares, water-carts omit their rounds, girls grow pale, chaperons haggard, and the carriage-horses go down in their action. Dresses are packed, bills left unpaid, thermometers stand at eighty degrees in the shade; and so comes Goodwood, and after Goodwood—the Deluge!

In the meantime, one of the great landmarks of summer has been reached, and "the world of fashion"—to use an expression of the morning papers—migrates into Berkshire. Furnished houses within a drive of Ascot racecourse have risen to fabulous prices; eight-roomed cottages in Windsor Forest command rentals that, on a yearly calculation, would seem exorbitant for Windsor Castle.

Lord St. Moritz, with considerable forethought, has secured a *bijou* residence within a mile of the Grand Stand, from Monday to Saturday, at something like the rate of twenty shillings an hour, and considers it rather a bargain! He has sent down servants, provisions, wines, scented soap, and every other luxury, to this picturesque little retreat, where fruit and flowers are already in profusion. He has inspected the arrangements himself, and made a careful

selection of guests. Paravant and Madame Beltenebrosa are of the party, and it is ten o'clock p.m., the night before the Cup Day.

Dinner is over; champagne has been drunk freely; claret in moderation; and coffee is served in a little gem of a drawing-room, having French windows opening to the lawn. A lovely night, with myriads of stars, tempts the ladies out of doors, and patches of white dot the shadows cast by a fine old cypress across the sward. Stocks, cloves, and picotees add their perfume to the fragrance of new-mown hay from a meadow outside; the young moon is rising behind a group of sturdy oaks, of which the topmost branches have hardly yet put forth their summer leaves; and a nightingale trills and gurgles persistently in a neighbouring copse, the private property of Her Majesty the Queen.

No wonder the gentlemen stroll out of a deserted drawing-room to these enchanted grounds. Prance lights a cigarette with permission, Paravant a regalia without, and Lord St. Moritz drops into a rustic chair by the side of Beltenebrosa. He has not seen her for two whole days—eight-and-forty hours! And as she sat apart from him at dinner—for neither prejudice nor predilection can overrule the table of precedence laid down by Burke—has had no opportunity of telling her so. She had been asked to come on Monday afternoon for Tuesday's racing, but wise in her generation, did nothing of the kind. She promised, however, to be down early on Wednesday, yet deferred that engagement also at the last moment, and only arrived with her maid by a late train in time for dinner. To Paravant, whom she despatched on the Tuesday after breakfast, that he might not lose two days' racing, she condescended to explain.

"My dear," said she, in the tone of good-humoured indifference to which she had gradually accustomed him, "gentlemen cannot understand these things, but I don't mind telling *you*. I am like Mrs. John Gilpin—

> For though on pleasure she was bent,
> She had a frugal mind.

I only ordered two new dresses; these will come perfectly fresh on Thursday and Friday. They are rather pretty, and I flatter myself Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa,

will not look such a dowdy among the best! Now do you see?"

He did *not*—wondering inwardly why a day's rest and a smoothing-iron should fail to reproduce either of these costumes as good as new, but, feeling weak on this point, abandoned the argument to equip himself for the races, where, trusting to his own judgment, he spotted two winners and won three hundred pounds.

I have my doubts, however, as to the validity of his wife's excuses, and am inclined to think that her deferred appearance at such a social gathering was the result of deep consideration, not without insight into the peculiarities of human nature.

"I shall be expected," she thought, "on Tuesday, and when they see Forward James, who is sure to make himself conspicuous, they will ask why I am not there? By three o'clock on Wednesday the Molecatcher and his tribe will have found out many reasons for my absence, all calculated to promote gossip, even scandal. I shall be credited with every kind of vagary. The men will say I have quarrelled with Lord St. Moritz, or run away from my husband. And the women will declare I am laid up at home with the mumps! But they will talk about me, that is the great point, and when I do appear on the Cup Day all London will be down, and I shall be an object of general interest (for, after all, the world is a great fool), and perhaps in my pale lavender, with black lace, even of admiration. It's hard on my host, I admit, but he will like me none the worse, I fancy. Besides, he has had two nice little letters, and I mean to be very good to him while I'm there."

In pursuance of this virtuous resolution, Beltenebrosa showed her appreciation of Lord St. Moritz a little more unreservedly than usual; and that nobleman, who calculated such matters to a nicety, felt no reason to be dissatisfied with the trouble he had taken in arranging his Ascot party, or the rent he was paying for his house.

A man of experience, though his heart may be in danger, seldom loses his head. Lord St. Moritz was an old and practised player at that game, in which one or other is usually a heavy loser; but his was a nature, not uncommon among his class, that displays more and more skill with increase of stakes. Always most in earnest when

he seemed least so, a woman could never calculate on his actions or his motives, as Lady Goneril did not mind confessing she had found out, to her cost.

He had been exceedingly attentive to her all day on the course, and neglected Mrs. Stripwell in proportion, who consequently sulked the whole afternoon, and if her maid can be credited, shed tears while dressing for dinner. Neither lady could have joined his lordship's party, owing to previous engagements, but both felt aggrieved not to be asked. The former, thinking some unusual duplicity must be concealed under his apparent return to allegiance, resolved to watch him narrowly, "determined," as she herself expressed it, "to find out what he was at!"

For the present, however, she was a good three miles off, with quite enough on hand to occupy her attention, besides a cup of coffee at her side, a rose in her lap, and the glowing end of a cigar some six inches from her ear, behind which lurked an exceedingly pleasant young gentleman, inclined to make himself more than usually agreeable.

"I'm glad you like it," said Lord St. Moritz, as what else could he say, in reply to a well-merited compliment from his guest, on the selection of this charming spot for their revels? "It wasn't so nice last night, nor the night before. Why didn't you come on Monday?"

"Now you're going to scold me."

"Should you mind if I did?"

"I should take it as the highest compliment. When I scold people, it means I really do care for everything belonging to them."

"Do you ever scold Paravant?"

It was a *gaucherie*, as he felt, even while the words escaped his lips. Only a schoolboy would have reminded her of her husband at such a time, but he picked himself up adroitly enough, and added—

"He don't deserve it to-day. Quite the reverse. He landed two hundred, I think he told me, backing an outsider. I was so pleased."

"That's very kind."

"I was. You may think it strange, but I assure you I like Paravant for his own sake."

"Not the least strange. So do I."

"Yes, but I like him a great deal more for yours. If you had a dog (let me put down your coffee-cup) I should

be fond of it. I believe I should even wish to change places with it."

"Suppose I don't care for dogs?" said she, rising from her seat, with a woman's instinctive shrinking from a subject which nevertheless she delighted to approach.

"I would accept the kicks, and take my chance of the halfpence," he replied, laughing, but added in a graver tone, "I wish I could find out exactly what you do care for."

"It's no use wishing," she murmured, with a low soft sigh, that emboldened him to steal his hand into her own.

Her mood changed on the instant, and snatching it away, she turned towards the window of the well-lit drawing-room.

"Not yet," he pleaded, "don't go in yet. Once round the lawn and back through the shrubbery to hear the nightingales sing."

Whether she relented or meant to persist in re-entering the house, must remain uncertain. His name was called by half a dozen voices, to remind him that the first duty of a host is towards his guests not individually but collectively. "Lord St. Moritz! Lord St. Moritz!" they clamoured, "we will appeal to Lord St. Moritz!" and they crowded into the glare of the windows, offering their opinions, with a great deal of noise and laughter, while they pressed for his verdict.

The discussion was on no less important a subject than that of dress as worn at the races by two rival beauties, one of whom was Mrs. Stripwell herself, the other a fair importation from New York, with the most charming little nose ever employed as an organ of speech. Prance, having a speciality for such matters, knew with certainty that the artist who decorated the English lady was a London celebrity, outrageous in price, whereas the fair American's costume came of course from Paris, and might be a trifle dearer. The bill, indeed, as sent to papa's counting-house, seemed positively awful in francs, and not to be calmly contemplated in dollars.

"Now, which was the best dressed of these two ladies? Not the handsomest, that had nothing to do with it. Lord St. Moritz would hardly be a fair judge."

This little shaft, aimed by a damsel who thought she had been somewhat neglected during the evening, was meant to reach the gipsy, but fell harmless, for Beltene-

brosa was thinking of something else. The question lay wholly between two dresses. One crimson-and-orange, the other purple-and-green; loud, not to say daring colours, and, to use a French expression, that swore at each other hideously. Yet, thus boldly placed in juxtaposition, producing a certain picturesque effect, startling indeed, but sufficiently pleasing to the crowd.

Prance and Lady Mary voted for crimson-and-orange, all the others for purple-and-green. What did Lord St. Moritz think?

Lord St. Moritz thought them "neat but gaudy." Lord St. Moritz declared Lady Mary's own simple little toilet of white and jessamine in better taste than either. Lord St. Moritz cursed both dresses in his heart, and was incautious enough to express an opinion that Madame Beltenebrosa would appear in something to-morrow that should cause both Mrs. Stripwell and the pretty Yankee to wish they had stayed at home!

Here elbows touched their neighbours, and the meaning smile on more than one face deepened to a sneer. A tide of dislike seemed setting towards the "signora," and Lord St. Moritz decided to stem it by adjourning to the house with a proposal of music, and a hope that somebody would sing.

"What says Madame Beltenebrosa?" asked Lady Mary, rather viciously. "She seems to be queen."

"I wish I were," answered the gipsy, in perfect good-humour.

"You'd make a very beautiful one," exclaimed Prance, with enthusiasm.

"You would have *one* loyal subject," whispered the host, with devotion.

"Why, what would you do?" snapped her ladyship.

"I'll tell you," said Beltenebrosa, seating herself at the pianoforte. "I am sure my own sex would like to put me on the throne at once.

"If I were a queen, I'd make it the rule
For women to govern and men obey;
And hobbledehoys to be kept at school,
And elderly gentlemen hidden away.
But maids should marry at sweet sixteen—
If I were a queen, if I were a queen!

If I were a queen, I'd soon arrange
For a London season the whole year round;

And once a week, if we wanted a change,
We would dine by the river and sit on the ground,
When lawns are sunny, and leaves are green—
If I were a queen, if I were a queen!

If I were a queen, the lady should choose,
Taking her pick of them, round and square;
None selected should ever refuse,
Bound to wed, be she dark or fair,
Stout and stumpy, or lank and lean—
If I were a queen, if I were a queen!

If I were a queen, on Valentine's Day
Every girl should receive by post,
Flaming letters in full array,
Of darts and hearts burnt up to a toast;
With bows and arrows, and Cupids between—
If I were a queen, if I were a queen!

If I were a queen, I'd never allow
Tax on unregistered goods like these—
A woman's reason, a lover's vow,
A stolen kiss, or a silent squeeze;
A wish unspoken, a blush unseen—
If I were a queen, if I were a queen!"

"Bravo! Beautiful! Capital! What fun! Thank you!" exclaimed the audience. But Lord St. Moritz, bending over the pianoforte, whispered, "Always a queen —*my* queen. This is better than the nightingales!"

CHAPTER XXIX

BREAKERS AHEAD!

A ROOMY loose-box, littered in the whitest and smoothest straw, plaited round the edges with as much taste and skill as a dunstable bonnet; a manger, from which the last feed of oats has been eaten so heartily, that not a grain is left. A set of horse-clothing, lettered, braided, and bound, with no less ingenuity of ornament than the moccasins of an Indian brave. At one end a long square tail, combed and brushed to a nicety, large hocks, powerful thighs, and round well-turned quarters, throwing off the light like a satin robe; at the other, a firm, muscular neck, topped by a lean and handsome head, with the liquid eyes of a deer, full, deep, wistful, courageous, yet not devoid of sadness, such as impart its touching beauty to that most sensitive and daring of animals, the thoroughbred horse.

A step is heard outside, the door opens, and a short, stout, rosy-faced man enters, with a ring-key in his hand. This worthy looks — and indeed is — honest as the day. So long as wasting and starvation enabled him to ride the weights, he was a jockey of unflinching integrity. As a trainer, he is equally trustworthy, and his employer, a French gentleman, who brings the natural genius for method to bear on his management of a racing-stable, with considerable success, has exported him from Newmarket to Normandy, solely because of the high character he bears in his profession.

He dearly loves the animals in his charge, and would fain ride them their gallops, even now; but though his attire is of a shape and texture expressly intended for

horse-exercise, its fit seems so tight as to involve insuperable difficulties in getting up.

For several minutes he stands motionless, admiring this masterpiece of nature, perfected by art, his own art, in which he excels; then lifting the embroidered quarter-piece, passes his hand along the smooth supple skin, that plays over those mighty ribs, like silk on steel.

"You'll do!" he murmurs, shaking his head with profound sagacity. "It's your job this is, and your journey, and your day too, if I'm not mistaken. Frenchman, do they call you? And they're laying five-to-two, are they? Well, you may be a Frenchman, but if you and I don't carry the Cup home between us, I'm a Dutchman, and that's all about it!"

The horse seems to understand, accepting the liberty taken with his person as a caress, to be acknowledged by a playful flourish of his tail, while he lays back his ears, and catches the manger between his teeth, in which amiable frame of mind he will be forthwith led out saddled and mounted, to become the object of many thousand admiring eyes as one principal attraction of the day, for this is Vermuth, a winner of the French Derby, and the talent are laying but short odds against him for the Ascot Cup.

An easy garden-seat, with a back at the proper angle, in that privileged enclosure near the Royal Stand, to which access is attained by favour of the noble Master of the Buckhounds, whose life is made a burden to him with shoals of impossible applications for weeks beforehand. A soft summer sky, shaded by mackerel clouds overhead, a panorama of England's loveliest scenery, stretching to a wide horizon around. In front, a crowded plain, dotted with booths, and flags, and snowy tents, and gaudy marquees, swarming with holiday-makers in thousands, and carriages in hundreds, and drags in scores, bordered by a well-kept lane of green, wherein a preliminary gallop of variegated jockeys shows like a bed of tulips in a breeze. Behind, stands, filled to overflowing, pillars to roof, with a sea of faces turned one way, and on either side the pick of our English aristocracy — men, strong, well-built, upstanding—women, fair, gracious, stately, the handsomest, if not always the best-dressed, in Europe.

Many are the looks directed at the garden-seat above mentioned. Elaborate and severe are the criticisms on

costume, complexion, bearing, manners, character, and antecedents of its occupant, surrounded as she is by admirers, who neglect their attachments, their tobacco, their luncheons, even their betting-books, to win the smiles of which that delicate, handsome face is exceedingly sparing. In her airy toilet of pale lavender and filmy black lace, so becoming to the exquisite shape, clear skin, and shining black hair, she is looking her best, and has been told so indeed many score of times.

Yes, like Vermuth, it is *her* day too, and she shares with that distinguished quadruped the homage of the multitude, for this is Beltenebrosa, the handsome gipsy-looking woman, who has taken the town by storm, and toppled down half a dozen acknowledged beauties from their pedestals in as many weeks.

When the French horse was brought out to be saddled, she felt, with a thrill of gratified vanity, that this equine celebrity hardly distracted attention from herself.

Paravant indeed, who could see as much of her as he wanted at home, scanned Vermuth with eager and inquiring eyes. Prejudiced, perhaps, against its nationality, and aware that, as regards training, our neighbours have yet something to learn, he felt persuaded the animal was not properly prepared, and must be defeated by the severity of a long and trying course that finished up-hill.

"Too big!" he said to himself, pulling the pencil from his betting-book. "Want of puff will stop him! Steelboy's a rare little horse. If they only make the pace good enough he ought to walk in by himself"; and Forward James, shouldering his way through masses of spectators, offered his two-to-one, and eventually his five-to-two, against "the Frenchman," with more confidence than prudence, till he stood to lose or win a considerable stake on the event.

"What a beautiful creature!" exclaimed Lady Goneril, with her glasses pointed at Vermuth, pacing proudly under his little rider in cerise and gold.

"She is, indeed!" assented Prance, thinking the remark applied to Beltenebrosa, off whom he had not taken his eyes for several seconds: "I never saw her look so well. Don't you agree with me, Lady Goneril, that's far and away the prettiest get-up on the course?"

I appeal to the whole sex, whether her ladyship was not justified in giving battle at once.

"D'you mean that Paravant woman, who calls herself by some outlandish name?" she exclaimed, in high dudgeon. "No, I don't! She looks like a slate-pencil dipped in ink. Mr. Prance, I'm sorry for your taste."

Now the Molecatcher prided himself on discrimination in matters of costume, and although he stood somewhat in awe of Lady Goneril's lofty stature and uncompromising opinions, or, as he called them, "her uprightness and downrightness," such an assertion, in his present state of slavish admiration, could not pass unchallenged.

"It's not MY taste alone!" said the little man rebelliously; "even Mrs. Stripwell thought the dress becoming; and as to the lady herself, only count the men she has got round her, Lady Goneril—that's the best criterion of good looks."

As Lord St. Moritz was just then unfurling the parasol, and whispering in the ear of his guest, the Molecatcher's observation showed a superfluity of neither tact nor *savoir-faire*.

"Men!" repeated Lady Goneril, in accents of withering scorn; "dancing-dogs and monkeys I call them! Do you think they mob her because she is beautiful? Not a bit; only because she is strange. Do you see that gipsy girl grinning at the rails, with a tambourine? If I were to wash and dress her up she'd be very like your Madame What's-her-name, only better-looking, because she has a healthier colour."

He could stand to his guns no longer.

"She *is* pale, I admit," said he, with another glance at the cause he was deserting, "but I never saw her so white as to-day. Good heavens! She's going to faint!"

"Going to be sick, more likely," returned her ladyship, whose own luncheon had been copious and unwholesome, while she adjusted her glasses for another look at Vermuth, sweeping up the course, with a long easy stride, that caused Paravant an uncomfortable spasm, as he almost wished he had "let the Frenchman alone."

His wife turned indeed pale to her lips, and, for a moment, gasped as if she were choking. Lord St. Moritz rushed off to get a glass of water, but she recovered composure before he returned.

Like Lady Goneril, she had noticed the gipsy girl with a tambourine, and recognised Nance, who waited on her

in Fighting Jack's caravan. Worse. She felt sure that Nance recognised *her!*

Damocles, so often quoted in illustration of an uncomfortable position, no doubt forgot the impending sword for many minutes together. We accustom ourselves to the most precarious situations; and Beltenebrosa, since her marriage, especially of late, while moving in a sphere so remote from theirs, had ceased to think of her fellow-wanderers, or to recall the threats with which Jericho warned her against the mortal offence she had committed in uniting herself to a Gorgio.

But now, with her first glance at Nance's swarthy face, came back, in overwhelming force, the memories and apprehensions she had hidden away. Recalling the character of her young gipsy kinsman, his sentiments, his denunciations, his cruelty, cunning, and fierce vindictive nature, she turned faint and sick with fear.

Everything seemed changed. The sky was no longer soft, the foreground gay, nor the distance fair. The inferiority of a rival ceased to yield triumph, the compliment of an admirer to afford gratification. There was no pleasure in seeing Mrs. Stripwell's sulk and Lady Goneril's sneer, but there seemed something consolatory in the devotion of Lord St. Moritz, and she began to feel a sense of dependence on his lordship, a consciousness she was safer with him at her side, that, could he have known it, would have delighted him exceedingly.

Take a million of people, however, all of whom individually, in thought and feeling, are distinct as light from darkness, and it is surprising how, collectively, they are roused alike, by a common interest, a common excitement, or a common panic. Not one in a hundred, not one in a thousand, of the crowd thronging Ascot Heath but was more or less a partisan of the French or English horse, as the tide of popularity swayed from one to the other favourite, for the great race of the day. It speaks well for John Bull's hospitality and love of fair play that Vermuth should have had the call; and I may mention that, when mounted, he rose to even betting in the ring, while five-to-two could be got about Steelboy, and even three-to-one.

In the enclosure gloves were wagered by the basketful, besides lockets, bracelets, and other jewellery; nay, there were not a few fair speculators who ventured pocket and pin money, and deeper stakes yet, that they little dreamed

of at the time. Even Beltenebrosa forgot her apprehensions for a moment when the saddling-bell rang. And now the numbers are up, the horses mounted. Two, three, five, seven, eight, and eleven, come striding by, looking, to the uninitiated, one as good as another, each a paragon of its kind, beautiful, courageous, enduring, as poor Lindsey Gordon hath it—

A tower of strength with a turn of speed.

And it requires, indeed, a practised eye to foresee that this little troop of the swiftest creatures on earth will be drawn out, at the finish, in a string some hundred and fifty paces long.

"Four is scratched and six don't start," says Prance, opening his glasses; but this information, being already made public by the absence of their numbers on the board, is received with little interest, and the opinion of Lord St. Moritz that Vermuth will certainly win excites far more attention.

"I have just seen the Vicomte," he whispers to Beltenebrosa; "the horse is as well as can be. If he runs on his merits I don't see how he can lose."

Paravant, close behind, overhears, and bites his lip. Has he been too confident?

"I hope not," he proclaims aloud, for the benefit of all whom it may concern. "I've stood against him to the shirt on my back. I've more than half a mind to hedge."

"It's too late to get out now," observes his lordship, with one of those smiles that denote neither mirth nor benevolence. "They're at the post by this time. It's a false start! No! By Jove, they're off!"

The glasses all turn one way—love, hatred, rivalry, flirtation, everything is forgotten but the race—from the duchess at the back of the royal box to the drab in front of the royal circus; myriads of hearts and eyes are riveted on a level streak of rainbow colours, that dance, and shift, and mingle, like the hues in a kaleidoscope held with unsteady hand.

There will be a roar presently to shake the earth, but in the eager hush of attention now such observations as these are audible enough:—

"What's that in front? Blue and black cap?"

"That's Outlaw, making running for Vermuth—making it a cracker, too!"

"He's shot his bolt—Steelboy's leading! He's a length in front. Well done, little 'un! By Jove, what a merry pace it is! Some of them will never get home at all!"

"Outlaw's beat, and so is Python. I knew *he* couldn't stay. What's that next the rails? It's the French horse, and he's coming up, hand-over-hand."

"Not he! Steelboy's caught him! He's changed his leg. No, he hasn't! Steelboy! The Frenchman! Sit down and ride him! Steelboy's beat! Not a bit of it! Now for a set-to! Vermuth wins! It's a slashing race!"

But it *wasn't* a slashing race; the favourite, well served by his stable-companion—whose jockey took care it should be run to suit him—ridden, moreover, with admirable patience and judgment, was pronounced by those who understand such matters to have won cleverly, as they called it, with something in hand.

Forward James thought so too. His confidence in his own judgment had cost him more hundreds than he liked to count, and he found little to console him in a conversation he happened to overhear between the owner and a most enthusiastic backer, while Vermuth, with a bottle clinking against his snaffle, was being unsaddled after victory—

Said the Vicomte—a dry, reserved, and very undemonstrative person—apparently quite unmoved by his victory—

"*Eh bien! Alphonse, ne t'avais-je pas averti?*"

"*Parbleu! mon cher,*" replied Alphonse, triumphant—resplendent Gascony written in every line of his round portly figure, his handsome, swarthy, Southern face. "*C'est-à-dire, que tu m'as follement payé la goutte?*"

Paravant listened, and caught the allusion, and partly understood, cursing the French horse and the blissful Frenchman freely in his heart.

CHAPTER XXX

SHOAL WATER

DINNER at the *Bijou* did not go off so swimmingly as yesterday. Few people have spirits inexhaustible enough to last out three days of merrymaking in the same company; and it requires a fund of originality, that may well be called genius, to afford consecutive topics of conversation, hot-and-hot, as it were, to jaded pleasure-seekers, hardly caring to be amused.

Racing, too, though an exciting pastime, is not without a reaction, tending to make its votaries—especially the losers — thoughtful and depressed. None of Lord St. Moritz's party seemed thoroughly satisfied with the day's results. Prance regretted an element of caution in his nature that, except to the amount of a half-crown lottery, prevented his speculating at all. Lady Mary—whose information came direct from a great personage, always good-natured and generally right—was tortured by self-reproach because she had not ventured her whole yearly income, instead of half. Paravant, with some reason, seemed downhearted, and even sulky; while the rest experienced that sense of void and weariness which waits on all excitement involving no bodily risk, but, strangely enough, never affects those who come out of actual danger, either deliberately encountered or undergone by chance. Perhaps the least dissatisfied person in the company was the butler, courteously offering champagne, who had backed Vermuth for this very event at no worse a price than twelve-to-one eight months ago, on information he could trust. "Never meant to 'edge," as he told his club; "never *did* 'edge; and landed one 'undred and twenty cooter as easy as changing a plate!"

What had his lordship done? everybody asked in common courtesy. Nobody waited for his answer, nor did he volunteer information, for St. Moritz was engrossed

with other ventures, in which he hoped by skill, daring, and patience to come off a winner.

The conversation dragged. Lady Mary cruelly snubbed the poor Molecatcher, and altogether shut him up. Then she tried a passage of arms with Paravant, who retorted so fiercely that she shrank back into her shell, and the whole party looked at each other in dismay. His wife could have told her ladyship Forward James was as cross as two sticks, having gauged his temper most unsatisfactorily, while he was dressing for dinner.

Flushed with success on the previous day, he had offered her a share of his winnings. To do him justice, Paravant's liberality, like his good-humour, was in the ascendant when things went right, and Beltenebrosa accepted gladly, making rapid mental calculations, the while money seemed very easy to get on a racecourse. A hundred pounds, she observed, rose to five in a couple of minutes, for those who invested judiciously on the speed of a horse. More than one admirer had already confided his discovery of "a good thing," and offered, in appropriate jargon, "to put her on what she pleased." Oh! if she might only win five hundred pounds—not all at once, such a piece of luck could hardly be expected, but by a succession of judicious ventures on the soundest advice, count it out in bank-notes, pack it up in a registered letter, and send it off to Mervyn Strange, at the old church where she was married! What a relief it would be to get rid of a debt that so weighed on her conscience! She would rather have a millstone hanging round her neck!

Paravant was tying white cambric round his own—an operation in which it irritates a man to be interrupted—when she entered his dressing-room, with a meek reminder of his promise, and an offhand request for a hundred pounds then and there.

"I can lock it up in my travelling-bag," said she. "It's as safe with me as with you." She had never seen him look so savage.

"A hundred devils!" he exclaimed. "You must be mad. Where the —— do you suppose it's to come from? This is the worst day I ever had in my life, and you walk in asking for money, as if there was nothing to do but turn the tap on, and draw it like beer!"

She was not the least frightened, only scornful and disgusted; passing the glass-doors of the wardrobe in her

own room, she could not help glancing at the beautiful woman reflected therein, and wondering, rather bitterly, if any man but a husband could have been so rude and unfeeling, all for a miserable hundred pounds!

The weather turned colder. There was some question of ordering fires, and the evening set in wet. Slugs and snails came out in the garden, but the ladies remained indoors. Paravant was all for another bottle of claret—the rest seemed inclined to help him. A magnum of the best made its appearance; they began to talk about racing, and sat so long, that ere the men entered the drawing-room the ladies were yawning in separate corners, and it was past twelve o'clock.

But when his lordship gave Beltenebrosa her candle, she thanked him with such a look in the deep dark eyes as thrilled even his world-worn heart—so stimulating his natural urbanity and good-fellowship, that Paravant, in spite of ill-humour, could not but acknowledge the social merits of his host, confiding to Prance, as they left the smoking-room, that he considered St. Moritz the pick of the Upper House. "None of your half-and-half chaps, but a real downright trump. A man a fellow could depend upon all round!"

The Molecatcher, dying to go to bed, expressed a cordial assent, and gladly wished him good-night.

But a new day brought cheering sunshine, restored spirits, more wagers, more dresses, more hopes. Beltenebrosa, refreshed by sleep, came down to breakfast looking even handsomer than usual, in a pale-yellow garment of clear delicate tint, that set off her white skin and black hair to the greatest advantage. "Like an early primrose," said Prance, in a vein of poetry. "Or a firkin of butter," added Lady Mary, in less pathetic prose.

"I am glad *you* think it pretty," whispered the wearer to Lord St. Moritz, who approved cordially, with just such a stress on the personal pronoun as might either mean a mere compliment to his taste, or an assurance that she desired no other admiration, and dressed for him alone.

He accepted it in the sense most pleasing to his vanity; and they proceeded to the Heath, with a consciousness on both sides of that mutual understanding which is so delightful, so dangerous, and so impossible to preserve for more than about a week!

I believe there is no such happy time for two individuals

as the first dawning of an admiration which circumstances may or may not foster into attachment hereafter. They are pleased to meet, but do not break their hearts if kept apart. The sense of proprietorship is not yet strong enough to warrant jealousy, and while much may be hoped from the future, the past has nothing to regret. There seems a joyous freshness in the gift or acceptance of a flower for the first time, that subsequent lockets and bracelets can never recall, nor even the solemn investment of an engaged ring. And believe me, young ladies who are still "in maiden meditation fancy free," who take your partners as they come without partiality, favour, or affection, giving them dances, round and square, in due succession, you should make the most of this your first season, for you will never have so much fun in another; and though *happiness* may be snatched by fits and starts, there is no such thing left as *comfort* when once you begin watching the door!

Lord St. Moritz lost no time in cementing the dreamy fabric he had been at considerable pains to rear. They had hardly entered the enclosure before he offered Beltenebrosa his race-card, entreating her to select the odd number against the even, for the smallest wager—a pencil-case, a pair of gloves, one of the flowers she wore at her breast—anything, however trifling, because at *this* game it was not allowable to play for love!

She coloured; she hesitated.

"Oh, Lord St. Moritz!" she said, "I don't know how; I never made a bet in my life."

"That is why I want you to make a bet with *me*. I should like to be associated in your mind with your first lesson in anything—good or bad. Perhaps you think the stakes too low. Make them what you choose—a kind word, a smile, a friendly thought: that's as good as a thousand to me!"

She pondered a moment, and answered gravely, "No; if I make a bet it shall not be a sham one. Flowers, and gloves, and trinkets are all very well; but I *should* like, once in my life, to win a real wager on a real horse."

"So you shall!" he exclaimed heartily. "I know what ought to be a certainty for the Ladies' Plate. I'll find out if it's all right from the trainer, and put you on if I can get a decent price—say five-to-one."

"I don't quite understand."

"If he wins you will get five pounds, and if he loses you pay one."

"Capital! Why don't people always bet like that!"

"You must ask Paravant," he replied, laughing; yet a little disposed to doubt in how far this ignorance might be assumed.

"He wouldn't explain. He never tells me anything about his racing affairs. I don't see why I should be more communicative. No; whether I win or lose, I shall play this, as you gentlemen say, 'off my own bat.'"

"All right," answered his lordship, perfectly satisfied; "then I'll go at once. How much will you have?"

"How much do you think? I want to win. Well—I should *like* to win a hundred pounds!"

He stared. This was rather more than he bargained for. He had expected ten, or perhaps even a "pony," and felt like a man out hunting who comes sailing down to a fence that turns out more formidable than he thought. Never mind. The hounds were running, so to speak, and he must have it, whether or no!

"Then I'll set about it at once," said he; and Beltenebrosa, whose eyes had begun to follow him about a good deal of late, saw the white hat bend confidentially to a small man in gaiters, and a smaller in an overcoat, ere it was lost amongst other hats of every description in the whirlpool of the betting-ring.

"How are you, my dear Mrs. Bell? How d'ye *do*? Who'd have thought of our meeting here? And you're looking so well—I am indeed delighted!"

She wasn't. After respectful bows and admiring glances from the highest in the land, beginning at the very top, it was indeed a come-down to be thus accosted by Mr. Delapré, manager of the Nonsuch Theatre, over-gloved, over-hatted, over-dressed, and over-presuming.

She stared as if trying to recall his name, bowed coldly, and rising from her chair, put her arm in Lord St. Moritz's, who returned at the moment, observing with considerable "intention," "This place gets so crowded—that's the worst of the last day! They let in all sorts of people without tickets. Let us take a turn on the course!"

Mr. Delapré was furious, not without reason, having passed into this exclusive paradise under a legitimate permit, that had cost him no less a price than the acceptance of an unsuccessful farce, an introduction to a rising actress,

and the singing in suffocating smoking-rooms of more than one comic song.

"*Adieu* then, Mrs. Bell," said he, with a stage bow and a stage sneer. "Or rather, *au revoir*, for we shall meet again"; and so made his exit, dramatically enough—head up, chest thrown forward, nostrils expanded, breathing high disdain and war to the knife.

"Who the deuce is that?" asked Lord St. Moritz. "And why does he call you Mrs. Bell?"

"Takes me for somebody else," was her answer. "I wonder if I ought to be flattered? Now tell me: what have you done, and how much are we going to win?"

He entered on a long explanation that she did not quite understand. How he had seen the trainer of Abigail, and her jockey, and one of her two owners; how she had given her year to this horse, and three pounds to that, meeting them to-day at even weights; how it was exactly her distance; she looked as fine as a star, she seemed as fit as a fiddle, the talent were very sweet on her. Little Bumptious was *up*, and she carried a pot of money for the stable. All Greek to his listener, till assured that he had himself backed the mare for a hundred at four-to-one, and the "signora" should stand in with him "a pony" on her own account, if she liked. But while his lordship thus detailed his transactions, that restless spirit of his was busy with the dialogue he had arrived in time to overhear. His knowledge of the world suggested there had always been some mystery in Beltenebrosa's account of herself before she married Paravant. About the latter could be no uncertainty whatever; West country magnates of sporting tastes vouched for his reality; and, indeed, he carried "squire" written in every line of his sturdy person, his healthy, sun-burned face. But as to this "dark ladye," whom his lordship had taken up for the distraction of an idle hour, to find an exceedingly disturbing element in his everyday life—Who was she? What was she? A foreigner could never speak our language so well, there was no more trace of accent in her pronunication than his own, and yet an Englishwoman was seldom so skilled in the little feints, passes, and parries of those skirmishes he loved to venture, preludes to a real attack, or, joining battle with a formidable adversary, could take such good care of herself the while.

"If she is really an adventuress," thought St. Moritz,

"and has cozened this joskin to marry her, with every intention of throwing him over at her convenience, why, it simplifies the whole thing, and I am not sure I like her one bit the worse!"

In the meantime, a bell rings, a flag drops; then comes a flutter of silk over the crowded heads, the crack of whips is heard through a dull beat of horses' hoofs and deafening roar of men's voices. A number goes up; a popular baronet, never afraid of "plunging," is congratulated. Somebody throws his hat in the air, and Lord St. Moritz takes a note-case from his pocket, quietly observing—

"I knew Abigail could pull it off. My only doubt was her being *meant*."

He has not served a long apprenticeship without discovering that ladies like to touch their winnings—it gives such a sense of reality and substance. So he counts ten flimsy scraps of crumpled paper into Beltenebrosa's hand, to be rewarded by the sweetest of smiles, and a sigh of deep, unutterable relief.

She never thinks of asking where they come from, and is not experienced enough to reflect that Lord St. Moritz cannot yet have been paid his winnings, and may possibly have offered her more than her share of a venture in which he was determined she should not be a loser. No, she is too much delighted with her success, and does not choose to see that she has taken the first downward step that compromises a woman in the eyes of her warmest admirer, and affords the vassal a claim he will hereafter put forward as entitling him to the privileges of a lord.

Yet is she conscious, while they leave the course to go home, that his lordship offers his arm with a certain air of proprietorship, and that already there is a slight and subtle difference in his manner, which she *feels* rather than *detects*. Therefore does she decline the proffered escort, and transferring him to Lady Mary, with a gentle reminder of his duties as a host, confides herself to the delighted Prance instead, and is glad she did so within the next two minutes, while they thread a shifting crowd beginning to leave the course.

The Molecatcher and his charge, being the last couple, are so far isolated from their party that a hundred persons crowd between. Nance, acting under instructions, advances, with winning gipsy-smiles, offering to tell the

fortune of "the dark lady and the handsome gentleman with beautiful blue eyes, one or both, my dears, for a little lily shilling, because your star is the same, and such a pair was never made to part!"

Prance, much elated, produces half a crown, which the gipsy pockets, but passes behind him to whisper with his companion.

"Sister," she hisses in the other's ear, "do you value your life?"

Beltenebrosa looks blankly in her face, feeling as if her very heart had stopped.

"It's doomed," continues Nance. "It's got to be taken anywheres, and anyhow, and at any time. But I can save you, I swear I can; only you must let me see you before dark to-night."

"Where?" gasps the listener, powerless to utter another syllable.

"You needn't take a long walk. Bless ye, I know—we all know. You be at the end of the garden—before dark, mind! Oh, sister, sister! it's a life-and-death job, this is!" Then changing her tone, for the Molecatcher's edification, she continues, in the true vagabond whine—

"But you'll cross the poor gipsy's hand with a bit of white money, beautiful lady. The gipsy couldn't ask for less, and there's gentlemen not far off—there's one at your elbow now—as would think a look of them dark eyes of yourn was worth more than gold!"

With which characteristic assertion, enhanced by many becks and nods and wreathed smiles, for his special benefit, the fortune-teller vanishes from Prance's sight, leaving him much impressed with her picturesque head-dress, mysterious knowledge, and personal charms.

"These — hum — these gipsies seem to understand things, Madame Paravant," says the Molecatcher, feeling his way, as it were, to a ten-minutes' flirtation during their walk. "That girl, now, eh? she described your eyes exactly, and all that. What she said about your elbow and *me*, you know, was so true. I wonder how they find out?"

She is looking straight before her, lost in thought. A delightful possibility deludes the too susceptible Molecatcher, that the gipsy's words may have opened the eyes of this beautiful woman to his adoration, which must henceforth be graciously accepted as ordained by fate. Alas, that he is so soon to be undeceived!

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Prance," says she, looking as if her thoughts and feelings are concentrated on some object a hundred miles away. "I am afraid I did not hear. I have got such a headache. I can neither speak nor see. I don't want to talk, please. I'd rather you didn't say a word to me till we get back."

"It's always the same!" thinks Prance. "I never get what I call a chance with a really nice woman, but something happens to bowl me out. That's just my luck. She wouldn't have had a headache if it had been anybody else!"

CHAPTER XXXI

PRIVATE THEATRICALS

MR. DELAPRÉ, leaving the enclosure after his rebuff, in a frame of mind most unfriendly to this audacious and unaccountable Mrs. Bell, was accosted by a slender, handsome young fellow, with dark eyes and white teeth, who seemed to have watched him for some time, awaiting his approach.

"Beg your pardon, sir," said he civilly. "Could I speak a few words with you? No offence, I hope. All fair and square."

The actor, disposed to study character in all ranks, assented freely enough, first taking care to button his coat over the watch and money in his pockets.

"You're a gentleman," continued the other, "and I'm only a poor chap—nothing more than a gipsy, your honour—of the old blood, though. If it's not a liberty, you and me can help each other."

To professional eyes the man was a study. His loose attire, his slouched hat, his knotted red handkerchief, his easy bearing, and the graceful carriage of his head, were so many details, to be appropriated and reproduced with artistic finish at a future time. Mr. Delapré unconsciously caught the gipsy's tone and manner, while he replied—

"What's up, mate? And what d'ye mean? Give it mouth, for I'm all in the dark myself."

The other stared.

"Look here, your honour," said he. "You and me is both on the same lay; but stow patter, there's too many here that understands it, and high English is good enough for us. That lady in the enclosure—her with the dark hair."

"What of her?"

"I knew it! I said so! That's right enough, isn't

it? And we want to take her down a peg or two—don't us?"

"Go on, my good fellow. You haven't made such a bad guess. How are we to set about it?"

"It's a hand I dursn't play without a partner," answered the gipsy. "I know well enough where she is, but I must get speech of her to work the thing as it should be worked. You're a gentleman, you are. If so be as you could help me to a suit of gentleman's clothes, I'd undertake to see her myself, find out what she's at, and put such a spoke in her wheel, as would knock her little game to shivers before the week's out."

Mr. Delapré pondered. The idea, perhaps because of its very extravagance, was after his own heart. Here seemed promise of adventures, dressings-up, surprises, situations, possible scandal, and eventual notoriety for himself.

He glanced at the gipsy's figure. The man was about his own height, though of slighter build, with well-shaped hands and feet. A happy thought struck him—daring, dramatic, worthy of his genius and histrionic powers.

"If I knew where to borrow other clothes," said he, "you should have mine; or if you could lend me a clean shirt, we might exchange for an hour or two. You wouldn't mind teaching me a little fortune-telling, I daresay, and a few tricks of the trade."

The gipsy's eyes sparkled. "You're a real gentleman," he exclaimed; "a nobleman, a prince! You ought to have been a Romany. If you will come across to that tent there, under a yellow flag, perhaps you'll find I have cleaner shirts than you thought for. You're welcome to the best, brother. You've promised help to Jericho Lee the first time of asking—that's good enough for him!"

"I can trust you?" said Mr. Delapré, who, though a bold fellow enough, had not quite taken leave of his senses. "I want to do you a good turn, and there's honour among —well, among all professions!"

"Look ye here," answered the gipsy; "I have said 'brother.' When Jericho Lee says 'brother,' you couldn't be safer among the Romanies, not if you was the duke of a tribe. There's no call for me to swear it—but *there!*"

With that he crossed his forefingers and spat over them on the ground, obviously attaching some mysterious importance to this unsophisticated formula.

The manager watched him attentively, pondering the while how so uncleanly a rite was to be modified for a polite audience in stalls and boxes.

Perhaps to Mr. Delapré the most enjoyable part of the whole day's pleasure-seeking was his visit at the gipsy's tent. It seemed altogether so fresh a scene, so novel an experience, affording a mine of treasure for future use and adaptation at the reopening of his theatre next week.

Every man likes to exercise an art in which he excels; and the unfeigned wonder betrayed by Jericho at his skill in making-up afforded him much satisfaction. In a few magical touches from a piece of common chalk, the loan of a neighbouring acrobat, by a pull here, a twitch there, and the application of some candle-snuff to his own eyebrows and eyelashes, he succeeded with astonishing promptitude in changing exteriors with his swarthy confederate, turning the latter into a very respectable imitation of a modern young gentleman as seen in hot weather on a racecourse, while he came out so strong himself, in Jericho's clothes and the gipsy character, as at the first glance to deceive even Nance, who, during the space of a full minute, took him for a former lover, long since convicted of various felonies and undergoing penal servitude for life.

In the meantime, Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa, had arrived at the *Bijou* fatigued in body and much exercised in mind as to how she could grant her gipsy lady's-maid an interview unobserved by the rest of the party. Here she was favoured by fortune, or rather by that injudicious consideration which society shows to an attachment, good or bad, so long as it is yet in the bud and has not lost its interest by becoming public property. Tea was laid in the library, a pretty little room opening on a conservatory, hung with sketches in water-colours, and containing some fifty or sixty volumes, mostly French novels, whence, after half a cup each, the company departed, as if purposely, one by one. Lady Mary had letters to write. "Really, with all this gaiety, one quite neglected one's duties in life! There was a time for all things, and she must answer seven invitations before the post went out!" Prance wanted to finish *Milor et Miladi*, a story of the very worst French kind, purporting to represent aristocratic English life, and relying for interest on the breaking of every commandment in the Decalogue, which improving work he carried off to his bedchamber.

One wished to see the chickens, another the pigs, and in ten minutes not a soul was left but Lord St. Moritz and Beltenebrosa.

Neither spoke till the last footstep died away, the last door slammed. Then his lordship moved across the room to where she was sitting, and bent over her with an air of chivalrous devotion that used to make Mrs. Stripwell laugh, but had been very effective with Lady Goneril.

"You look pale," said he, "my dear signora. You are tired. You have been doing too much, or something has happened to put you out. What is it? Won't you confide in me?"

Her answer was little to the purpose, consisting indeed of another question.

"Where is Mr. Paravant?"

She called him Mr. Paravant in conversation with Lord St. Moritz, who perhaps drew his own conclusions from this formal appellation.

"Oh! Paravant," answered her host, "he's gone to the kennels, and won't tear himself from Her Majesty's hounds for the next two hours. He's safe till dinner-time."

Then the coast was clear, but for Lord St. Moritz! If he could only have had letters to write, French novels to read, or pigs and poultry to visit! How to get rid of her host puzzled her exceedingly.

He watched the troubled looks on that beautiful face with no little triumph, attributing her uneasiness solely to his own admirable qualities.

"Lord St. Moritz," said she, after a pause, in the frank, winning tone it was so impossible to resist, "I may say anything I like to *you*, mayn't I—and you won't take it amiss?"

"Anything!" he repeated, plumping down on the sofa by her side.

She rose on the instant, as if they were playing see-saw; and, vexed as he felt, there seemed something so ludicrous in this compensatory oscillation, he couldn't help laughing outright.

"You're always good-humoured," she continued sweetly, "and you're always nice. I'm sure I've reason to say so. Now don't you think, if you and I are left here together on purpose—you know, like this—people will talk, and that's so disagreeable for both of us, and so—so dangerous for me? You're not angry, are you?"

What could he do? What would the Don himself have done? Even that worst of bad boys must have acceded to Zerlina's wishes, so lovingly put and so frankly expressed. Besides, was she not, as it were, mortgaging the future for this present immunity from calumnious remark? She admitted a mutual tie, a common interest. She could not repudiate these hereafter, when time and opportunity might serve him better than now.

Half vexed, half gratified, Lord St. Moritz went to join the pig and poultry fanciers, leaving Beltenebrosa free to follow her own devices till it was time to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER XXXII

BLACK-MAIL

WHAT a long five minutes it seemed, and how that heart of hers beat, though she prided herself on having it under strict control. She had resolved not to stir till the hand of a little fancy clock reached the quarter. She listened to make sure it had not stopped, feeling, as we all do at such moments, how lagging can be the pace of time. Like Mazeppa, stiff and smarting in his bonds, longing so wearily, after his wild night-ride, for the rising of the sun—

> How slow, alas, he came!
> Methought that mist of dawning grey
> Would never dapple into day;
> How heavily it rolled away
> Before the eastern flame.

But the pretty gimcrack chimed at last, so, passing to the lawn, she threaded the shrubberies with swift and noiseless step, to reach the limits of the garden unobserved.

A sunk fence separated dressed ground from hay-fields. Even as she reached its brink, out of the ditch sprang, not Nance as she expected, but a well-dressed, rakish figure, that she recognised, nevertheless, at the first glance, for Jericho Lee.

Instinctively she made sure there was no weapon in his hand, and, gaining confidence, confronted him steadily enough, pale indeed, and with parted lips, but eager, watchful eyes that never left his own.

"Where is Nance?" she asked haughtily, after a pause of painful suspense. "Why did you come instead?"

"To see with my own eyes," he answered, "and hear with my own ears, and learn for myself what excuse I can make for my sister to them as put me on the job."

"Speak lower," she urged, with the duplicity of self-preservation. "Half a dozen gentlemen, and all the men-servants, are within call."

He glanced round wary and watchful, moving eye and ear like some forest beast.

"That is why I changed my Romany rags," said he. "In such Sunday clothes as these, sister, the Gorgios would take me for one of themselves. But I have little time to spare, and them as sent me isn't very patient of waiting. My orders was to make an end of it and be back before dark."

"What do you mean?" she asked, with all her apprehensions returning. "I need only cry out and a dozen hands would be on your throat before you could move a finger, but I don't want to hurt you, Jericho."

It was a game of brag. He could not tell what assistance she might be able to command, but the conciliatory tone in which she pronounced his name restored confidence, and he laughed in scorn.

"I might do it with a turn of the wrist," said he, "before the best of them could run a hundred yards. But I want to spare my sister, if I may. I came here to-night in good-will. The gipsies are like their neighbours, for that matter; they're willing to take blood-money as the price of blood!"

"How much?"

She had the day's winnings in her pocket, but, notwithstanding her fears, was disposed to make the best bargain she could.

"It wouldn't be less than a banknote," said he. "Look at them silks and satins, look at them jewels on your throat and in your ears; watch and chain, too, and rings, I'll warrant, under them gloves. You wouldn't say that twenty was too much?—and ten more for poor Jericho?" he added, observing less surprise than he expected on the proud, set face. "In course I'll engage to free you, sister; this here ain't to be brought up again."

Voices were heard about the house, there was no time to lose, and pressing three ten-pound notes into his willing hand, she entreated him to vanish at once, for her sake and his own.

But Jericho, feeling safe enough in his disguise, so soon as he struck a public path that crossed the fields, swaggered slowly off to join a gipsy-looking person who was waiting for him at the nearest stile.

"I never saw anything better done," said the latter. "The make-up is capital, and you've caught the whole

trick of it without a rehearsal. You ought to have been an actor."

The gipsy, looking roguishly at Mr. Delapré, answered with a wink, reflecting possibly that, after all, it might need a cleverer fellow to prosper in his own precarious walk of life.

For a while Beltenebrosa, in the sanctuary of her apartment, felt a load had been lifted from her breast. But the relief was not for many minutes. She soon reflected that a demand so readily granted would be repeated on the first opportunity, and that Jericho's assurances of immunity might be trusted so long as her thirty pounds lasted him, and not a moment longer. With a heavy heart she began to sleek her black locks, feeling so dispirited as to avoid even the companionship of her maid. While thus occupied, her husband came into the room, after a prolonged inspection of Her Majesty's hounds in the yards and lodging-houses of the Royal Kennels. At any other time such a visit would have been recapitulated and dwelt on with much interest and no little prolixity. To-day, huntsmen, whips, feeder, distemper, drafts, boilers, troughs, and benches seemed obliterated by some more recent excitement, the details of which he proceeded to recount forthwith.

"Don't be frightened, Dragon," he began good-naturedly. In his best humour he sometimes called her by the abbreviation of "Bel," facetiously changed to the Dragon. "Don't be frightened, for I'll take care he shan't molest us; but I saw one of those d——d gipsy cousins of yours as I walked home by the fields just now. I spotted the beggar by his red scarf and battered white hat. I'm sure he was hanging about here for no good."

This description certainly did not apply to Jericho, disguised as a fine gentleman, and although she considered it likely enough that in case of violence he had a comrade within call, she thought well to profess more apprehension than she felt.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed, laying down the hair-brushes. "How disagreeable! How terrifying! They have found me out! They're going to hunt me down!"

"Not if I know it, Bel," he answered kindly. "You've had quite enough of them, in my opinion, and paid much too high a price for a week's lark among your kinsfolk.

You're not to be bothered any more. I'll take care of that! I'm rather glad now we're going to clear out of this to-morrow."

"So am I; it does me good to hear you say it."

"Are you? I was afraid this kind of life—all this dressing, and dawdling, and flirting, and showing off—suited you down to the ground."

She was longing for rest; the excitement of the last few days, culminating in her late interview, had been too much.

"I'm tired of it all," she said; "it's the same thing over and over again. I should like to go to bed for a month!"

"Ah! Combe-Wester, in my dear old mother's room, looking out on the Appleton-Cleves, with the purple moors against the sky—I couldn't help thinking of them to-day coming back across the Heath. Ah, there's no heather like ours down in the West. I wish I was there now."

"I'd no idea you were so poetical."

"Nobody ever told me that before. But there are some things every fellow feels, you know, and then one fellow puts them in a book and gets the credit. I'm a rough sort of chap—too rough, I often think, for such a handsome, graceful creature, Bel, as you; but I know what I like, though I can't always say what I mean!"

"You said that very prettily. When we get back to London to-morrow, we'll pack up and pay the bills. Now go and dress at once like a good boy, or we shall both be late again."

The packing up, notwithstanding an extensive wardrobe, seemed feasible enough, and even the payment of an interminable hotel bill was to be achieved by further inroads on capital, already broken into for the exigencies of settling-day at Tattersall's; but after these practical difficulties had been overcome, there were yet many obstacles, freely cursed by Paravant, in the way of an early departure to his Somersetshire home.

When Gulliver woke to find himself tied down by the little people during his nap, though he could have broken each single thread with a finger, their aggregate force held him like an iron chain; and it is a well-known fact that the whole weight of a horse can be suspended by the combined resistance of all the hairs in his tail!

So when we would cut ourselves adrift from London

life, we are checked at every turn by impediments, trifling in themselves, but irresistible, in the numbers constituting their strength.

Have we not all echoed the paradox of that great wit and statesman who observed, "How pleasant life would be if it wasn't for its pleasures!" And is there one of us who has not rebelled secretly in his heart, if not openly to his wife, against the infliction of some so-called amusement which he would have exchanged, only too willingly, for a couple of hours' healthy exercise on the treadmill? It was all very well to say, "Let us be off to Somersetshire at once," and to boast that the Flying Dutchman would deliver him at his own door in less than six hours; but Paravant was no more a free agent than you, or me, or the Lord Chancellor, or the Sultan, or the Shah of Persia, or any other married man.

To begin with, there were coming dinners a fortnight deep and more, for people take long shots at us in these days, and a friend of mine lately excused himself from a six-weeks' invitation, by pleading a previous engagement contracted *the year before!* Then there was a breakfast they ought not to miss at Hampton House, and a ball at the Duchess's (to meet royalty), and Beltenebrosa must hear the new opera, and Paravant, though vexed he had not been asked to play, would like to see a match at Lord's, between All-England and twenty-two of his own county, besides certain suburban race-meetings and water-parties on the river, both up and down. Altogether, it seemed exceedingly difficult to get away, and departure might have been postponed till the House was up, but for the persistency of Lord St. Moritz, who, after their memorable Ascot week, began to observe less caution than seemed discreet in his relations with Beltenebrosa.

He had discovered something of her previous history, and showed little generosity in his repeated hints and unpleasant allusions to an advantage thus gained by chance. Returning from the poultry-yard at the *Bijou*, he happened to catch sight of Jericho's figure, as the gipsy swaggered across a hay-field in his borrowed clothes. Something in the gait and bearing attracted his lordship's attention, and he experienced a certain vague consciousness of having seen that coat and hat and strutting step before; though he knew Mr. Delapré well enough on, and slightly off the stage, he failed to recognise the actor in a place where he

so little expected to see him as the enclosure at Ascot; but, oddly enough, the caricature of the man brought to his mind a haunting resemblance of somebody he ought to remember, more forcibly than the man himself. This puzzle occupied him all dinner, but at dessert its solution came across him like a flash.

"I have it!" he exclaimed, looking down the table to Beltenebrosa with inexcusable want of tact. "That fellow who thought he knew you to-day was Mr. Delapré, manager of the Nonsuch Theatre. He must have seen you in London!"

She never blushed, it was not her way, and perhaps only Lady Mary remarked her cheek turn a shade paler, while she answered, coolly enough—"Very likely. London is a large place, but there's a great deal in it better worth seeing than *me!*"

She thought it clumsy of his lordship, nevertheless, and St. Moritz himself felt ashamed of his blunder, wondering why he couldn't hold his tongue. Returning to town, he lost no time in calling on Mr. Delapré, who received him, we may be sure, none the less cordially because of his rank, and volunteered all the information he could supply on the subject, putting no too favourable construction on the antecedents of a lady who had rejected his overtures in Richmond Park, and snubbed him so cruelly on Ascot racecourse. Lord St. Moritz was at a loss, doubtful whether he ought to be pleased or provoked. This haughty dame should unquestionably have been an easier prize, and yet its very difficulties created the chief incentive to his pursuit.

In the meantime, Beltenebrosa, harassed, fatigued, perhaps a little *bored* in those exalted circles she had so desired to attain, and exceedingly uncomfortable at the idea of being hunted by her swarthy kinsfolk, began to treat her husband with increased kindness, such as caused him to feel in love with her once more. Forward James, though anything but brilliant, was gifted with a certain self-sustaining cunning, kindly furnished by nature for the assistance of ruder intellects, which useful faculty his late experiences of turf probity and London life in general had done much to sharpen and expand. He was fond of proclaiming that he "wasn't as big a fool as he looked." And it did strike him, after such reflection as he was capable of bringing to bear on the subject, that the visits of Lord

St. Moritz were more frequent than their intimacy warranted, his attentions to Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa, more marked, his manner more familiar, than was either customary or agreeable.

In short, he grew suspicious, jealous, watchful, and thoroughly unmanageable, becoming day by day a more troublesome escort abroad, a less tolerable companion at home.

Now, it was one thing to flourish about London where and how she liked, with a pleasant nobleman in attendance, while a husband, who asked no questions, was ready to bring her here and fetch her there, coming or going, or staying away altogether, at her convenience; and another, to be followed about and haunted by a clumsy, uncompromising guardian, who never left her side for a moment, and made himself exceedingly unpleasant, even in that happy situation!

Before a month was out, Beltenebrosa seemed only too glad to get away; and although she did manage a private leave-taking with Lord St. Moritz, sweetened by many promises to think, and write, and remember, I fancy this romantic interview was much less affectionate than he had taught himself to expect.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER CASES

"THEY'VE come home, after all, Mr. Tregarthen. I must say I never thought he would have the face to bring her back here!"

Dinner was over at the rectory. Dessert and port-wine were on the table, and the handy parlour-maid, who could shut a door without banging it, had retired, leaving master and mistress to the process of digestion undisturbed.

It was the hour which man, always more or less a materialist, loves to pass in tranquillity, but which woman, industrious, energetic, irrepressible, too often profanes by introduction of uncomfortable subjects, family troubles, domestic grievances, and difficulties of a like nature, better encountered in the middle of the day.

"Didn't you?" murmured the rector, sipping port in defiance of lumbago.

"Didn't I *what*? That's no answer, Silas. I say I never thought he would have dared to come here, nor that impudent minx neither."

"My dear, where would you have them live, but at their own home?"

"Where? Anywhere. It's an insult, an outrage—flying in the face of the county, I call it. Surely you don't mean we ought to call on them!"

"That's as you please, Selina. You know I leave all these matters to your own good sense. I should be sorry to break with my old pupil, too, especially as I think a little friendly advice would do him no harm. The Combe-Wester property is not large. James was always free about money, and I fear he is burning the candle at both ends."

"How do you know? You never told me a word."

"I only heard it to-day. He has done up the house,

from attics to scullery, all spic-and-span—fresh painted and papered; a man down from London to new-furnish the drawing-room; more stabling at the back, and a conservatory thrown out from the library window. It will cost a fortune."

His wife pondered. She would like exceedingly to inspect these handsome alterations, not only for the indulgence of that curiosity which right-minded women feel in the dress, decoration, and general expenditure of their neighbours, but also that she might pronounce on them in circles where she was considered an authority.

She wished now she had volunteered her opinion less decidedly; but nobody could "talk backwards" better than Mrs. Tregarthen, and she began to retract forthwith.

"It's natural they should have the best of everything," said she, ignoring the question of expense, as an inconvenient precedent. "Of course, it's her doing, and she always had good taste, I must allow. Besides, I understand they kept the best company in London—lords and ladies by the bushel, and even greater people than that."

Mrs. Tregarthen nodded, with the air of one who was behind the scenes. Her husband nodded too, drowsily, as having dined freely and well.

"Very likely, my dear," he assented. "Difference in rank is less thought of than it used to be. The marchioness lunched at Combe-Wester yesterday. She drove herself over in the donkey-cart."

"You're sure it was the marchioness; not the marquis? It makes all the difference, you know. Of course a Lord Lieutenant must be civil to everybody."

"Quite sure, Selina. The marquis walked across to fetch her. The donkey stood still, and her ladyship was two hours getting there. The marquis bade Giles cut one of my saplings in Ashwell to drive it home, and gave him a shilling."

"Which he spent in gin and cider, I'll be bound. That Giles wants a talking to, and he shall have it. You're too easy with them, Silas. It's lucky there's somebody who is not afraid to speak."

"It is, my dear. I don't care to be always finding fault. But about calling?"

"What do *you* think? Of course, if the county people visit them, I'm not going to be conspicuous by holding aloof. Perhaps, after all, it's a duty we owe to ourselves.

Have you finished, Mr. Tregarthen? Then we'll go to the study and ring for tea."

"It's very pretty, dear. I don't wonder you like it!"—Thus Beltenebrosa, sauntering home to dress for dinner at the hour Mr. and Mrs. Tregarthen rose from table to spend the rest of their summer's evening by lamp-light. "And how we've improved it, haven't we? It's not like the same place."

Paravant—clad from top to toe in white flannel, with straw hat, cricket shoes, and a spud in his hand—growled rather a grudging assent.

"It ought to look pretty spicy," he observed; "these fancies of yours cost a pot of money, and Combe-Wester didn't want to be much better when we began."

He looked lovingly over his trim lawn to the low-lying meadow, dotted with lofty elms, intersected with thickets rather than hedges, brightened by a sleepy pike-fishing stream, that widened into broad gleaming pools at every bend, shut in by wooded hills, under a faint line of purple, where dusky moorlands met the crimson and orange of sunset in a rich autumnal sky.

He was fond of his old home, and had spared no expense on its decoration, giving his orders with reckless liberality, as a man of taste and spirit; but such indulgences must be paid for, and the startling suspicion often came across him that, though he had made his house thoroughly livable, he could not afford to live in it after all!

She hated to touch on money matters, they reminded her of that galling debt still owing to Mervyn Strange. A millstone that had sunk her in deep waters—in betting transactions, pecuniary obligations, and compromising confidences with Lord St. Moritz—yet had not freed her from the liability she never could recall without a sense of painful humiliation, dashed by some strange sweet joy, of which she yet felt bitterly ashamed. A chapter on finance, too, rendered Forward James cross and disagreeable for hours, but it was difficult to keep him off the topic, and caustic St. Moritz described his character with no little accuracy when he declared "Paravant ought to be called Paradox! He's the most reckless fellow alive in pounds, but always seems to be haunted by the ghost of a shilling."

That spectre was hovering about him now, floating on

the shafts of golden lustre that flooded the valley, darkening the glories of a setting sun, dipping behind the level of the moor.

"We are going too fast, Bel," said he, digging viciously with his spud at a weed in the gravel-walk. "Something must be done. I can't live the pace, and that's all about it!"

"I thought you won at Newmarket. You told me so when you came back."

"A drop in the ocean, my dear. Not enough for the plumber's bill! Look here, Bel, everything's got to be paid up outside the house. The upholsterer will wait, and so will the builder, but day-labourers can't do without their wages, and that terrace of yours keeps as many spades going as a new railway!"

"Stop it, then. It looks very nice as it is!"

"And put it in everybody's head that I'm so hard up I can't even go on with my improvements—that *would* be a wise plan! Better advertise one's insolvency in *The Western Luminary* at once. Every tradesman would send in his bill as soon as he could make it out. No, no, Bel, I have a better plan than that."

"What is it?"

"You remember Swansdown Races?"

"I am not likely to forget them, nor my ride on Potboy!"

"Game little Potboy! He did us a good turn last year; he will do us another this. The meeting is next week. We'll have a party for it—London people, real swells, fellows with lots of money, and not afraid to spend it; your friend Lord St. Moritz, if you like!"

She started, but answered not a word.

"The little horse is at his best. I had a letter from my trainer yesterday. Nobody believes he can jump like a deer, and away again off the ground like a tennis-ball. He can't help winning the hurdle-race, if he's properly ridden, Bel; I shall ride him myself!"

She drew to his side.

"But isn't it dangerous?" she protested, with a solicitude that both pleased and flattered him exceedingly.

"Never you mind about that. I have pretty good nerves, and don't lose my head in a race, run it how they will. Of course, if a fellow's a muff, it's very easy to make a mess of galloping over hurdles, and a fall is no joke

on hard ground. But I'm not going to fall, not if I know it."

"And you'll take care?"

"Yes; I'll take care. There's only one of the others can make my horse gallop; that's Adonis, and I've found out that he's not *meant*. What with my weight, and being out of practice, and Potboy never having done anything in the jumping way, they will lay any odds you please, if I ride him myself; and I mean to go in for something worth winning this time, you see if I don't. I'm lighter than I look; I can waste quicker and easier than most people. We'll have St. Moritz down—you must manage that—and some more fellows who don't mind backing their opinions, particularly over my sixty-four claret; and it's very odd if I can't draw them for ponies, fifties, and even hundreds, at six and seven to one!"

"But are you quite sure you'll win?"

"Nothing is sure, Bel, in this world, but death and taxes! Bar accidents, you know, and if the horse keeps right, it's *good* enough; that's all I can say!"

"But you could make a certainty of *losing*, couldn't you?"

He gave a prolonged whistle, looking intensely amused; then bent his knees and doubled his arms in the attitude of a rider who pulls hard at his horse, while he observed—

"Certainly; it's easy enough to put the strings on. Captain Armstrong generally has a pleasant and profitable mount!"

"I don't know anything about Captain Armstrong. I never heard of such a person, and it's nonsense talking about *strings!* But it does seem to me the wisest way would be to make lots of bets against your own horse and then lose on purpose."

"Well done, Dragon!" he exclaimed, laughing heartily. "Live and learn. You haven't been to Ascot for nothing. Yours is a capital plan, and I'm sorry to say it is very often carried out. There's only one objection. I can't take advantage of it and remain a gentleman."

"Why?"

"Because it's dishonest. That's all! I might as well pick a friend's pocket at once. Indeed, that wouldn't be so bad; for I should run the risk of imprisonment with hard labour. No, no! Bel. Hang it! We haven't got to *roping* yet!"

"I don't see why you may not make sure of winning a bet one way more than another. When that horse with the long name hurt himself in his box, and you heard about it first, you told me yourself you laid against him as if he were dead! I remember, because I thought it such a funny expression. And, again, after that beautiful creature Amaranth was tried, and turned out not half so good as the ugly one, you betted ever so much against it, because you were quite certain it couldn't win. Now, where's the difference?"

But her question involved so long and comprehensive a disquisition on turf ethics, that when they reached the house it was not half concluded, nor, I may add, was Beltenebrosa half convinced.

CHAPTER XXXIV

COMBE-WESTER IN FULL DRESS

"A BUTLER and two footmen! *And* a boy, and—yes—another man out of livery. I declare it's sinful, Mr. Tregarthen. I wish I hadn't come!"

But here the rector's excellent wife departed from the truth, having, indeed, looked forward to the present occasion—a large dinner-party at Combe-Wester—with a curiosity that it would have cost her infinite mortification to disappoint.

On Jane Lee's first disappearance, more than a year ago, from her matronly charge, accompanied by a gentleman whom she termed "one's own curate," she placed the worst construction on that young lady's character, pronouncing her no longer worthy to take a place in the virtuous phalanx of which she was herself so unsullied an ornament. It made matters no better to learn that Mervyn Strange had been jilted by his beautiful companion, and when the latter reappeared on the surface as the legal wife of "that oaf, James Paravant," to use Mrs. Tregarthen's forcible expression, her indignation knew no bounds. She gave her opinion freely enough, particularly to the rector, but modified it, as we have seen, with ludicrous inconsistency, when she found the object of her disapproval admired and sought after by the whole neighbourhood. The marchioness, whose word was law for thirty miles round, having taken up Beltenebrosa in London, resumed her intimacy when she returned home. The marquis openly avowed his adoration, calling Mrs. Paravant the Star of the West; but as he was the busiest, the most good-natured, and the least impressionable old gentleman, such an admission caused his wife no uneasiness, and her ladyship, thirty years younger than her husband, frank, handsome, and a *little* fast, came to tea or luncheon at Combe-Wester five days out of seven.

"The husband is a cub, my dear," she wrote to her sister, at an Imperial Court; "but the wife is simply perfection—handsome, a little too dark, but so quiet, so graceful, and *such* good manners! No babies, no twaddle, no goody-goody, no airs and graces. I fancy she's more than half a foreigner, though she speaks English as well as I do. She *might* have a temper, when roused; but she's good-nature itself in everyday life. Sings, too, like an angel, and I should think, if necessary, can be as plucky as something else. It's such fun! The squiresses don't know what to make of her, but the squires would die for her to a man, and my lord is as bad as the rest. Write by the next mail," etc.

Thus befriended, it is not surprising Mrs. Tregarthen should have changed her mind concerning this black sheep, and called on the Paravants forthwith, not without hope of meeting the great lady there, to find nobody at home, receiving in return for this empty civility that invitation to dinner. She now protested she would rather have refused. Like many people who profess austerity of character, the rector's wife was much impressed by the pomps and vanities of a world that seemed less wicked when in full dress. She did not care to judge hastily of transgressors with two men in livery, but of those with two men *out* of livery, it seemed uncharitable to judge at all!

Entering the drawing-room in a conjugal fashion unhappily obsolete,—on her husband's arm, who had made himself extremely spruce, and kept his gloves on,—she was so bewildered by the unusual splendour of everything about her as scarcely to take note of the new furniture, and signally to fail in expressing, as she had intended, condescension, forgiveness, and assurance of continued protection, in her greeting to the hostess. That lady received her with a polite welcome, frank, dignified, perfectly cordial, but as completely "without consequence," to use a French expression, as if they had parted the day before.

Mrs. Tregarthen admitted subsequently that "turned loose with the others she felt as if she had dropped from the clouds." Only by a strong effort of will did she make out that the marchioness was not present, and, painfully conscious that among these smart London people she was sadly out of her element, she took

refuge in a photograph-book, and wished herself at home.

The rector, wisely attaching less importance to company than good cheer, felt less uncomfortable. Everybody said Paravant had brought down an excellent cook. The sixty-four he knew by experience was undeniable, so he pulled off his gloves and waited the summons to dinner with composure and satisfaction.

It startled him not a little to hear that important meal announced in French, and to the lady of the house.

"*Madame, est servie*," said a foreign domestic, with dark curls and earrings; whereupon Paravant stuck out his elbow, and marched off an Honourable Mrs. Somebody, whose husband was coming next day, while Beltenebrosa, with a tact and calmness that did her infinite credit, paired her couples so judiciously as to offend the pretensions of none, though she *did* whisper, following in their wake on the arm of Lord St. Moritz, "You must help me a little with the country neighbours. You won't find them very light in hand."

Mrs. Tregarthen, immediately in front, overheard, and shook with indignation, but the dandy who conducted her was so large, so gorgeous, altogether so splendid and overpowering, that her spirit sank within her; she felt unequal to attack or defence.

It was a pleasant dandy, notwithstanding, and won her heart long before the fish was off the table. Joyous, good-humoured, and thoroughly unaffected, in spite of its elaborate get-up, frankly interested in her poor, her pigs, her kitchen-garden, her autumn roses, with obvious knowledge of these rural subjects, and professing to study the rearing of poultry almost as eagerly as thoroughbred stock. It drank a great deal of champagne, coming out more affable and amusing with every glass, so that Mrs. Tregarthen, completely fascinated, could not but admit the flirtations with which she credited "fine London ladies," as she called them, to be less inexcusable than she had supposed.

Her husband, too, found himself well placed between his hostess, who attended sedulously to his bodily refreshment, and a very smart, very sprightly, not very young lady, of the modern fast school, whose maxim it was to make things pleasant for everybody, and who, like all great experimentalists, lost no occasion of adding one

more to her experiences in the discomfiture of mankind. With her bright eyes, white teeth, silvery laugh, and the pretty woman's ways she assumed as a matter of course, this incorrigible person, now in her seventh season, had long been a terror to devoted wives, and I admit, with regret, that the Reverend Silas so far became her victim as to find himself mentally comparing her charms with the ampler maturity of Mrs. Tregarthen, and asking himself, thirty years too late, why he had married so young. Altogether, the country neighbours seemed to get on very well without assistance from Lord St. Moritz, who found the more leisure to devote to his beautiful hostess.

Why was he here? She asked herself the question with mingled feelings of satisfaction, surprise, and a tinge of resentment towards Paravant.

"How odd husbands are!" she thought; and where is the wife who has not occasion for the same remark many times a day? "If he believes St. Moritz makes up to me, he ought not to invite him. If he don't, why was there such a fuss in London? Why did he bring me at short notice down here? Poor James! He likes me, I believe, but he *is* so stupid! The other is clever enough, but I wonder if he really cares? Something between the two would be—perfection!"

His lordship, also, whirling down by the Flying Dutchman with newspapers, novels, and cigarettes in profusion, to beguile his journey, had been considering the matter with an attention that he only brought to bear on such dangerous subjects as foolish attachments and dangerous intrigues. Like Horace, he plumed himself on having "militated not without glory," in unworthy warfare, and refused to admit that he was but a jaded epicure who had frittered away, on forbidden delicacies, the health and appetite that ought to have served for the enjoyment of a wholesome repast. At twenty he could have loved one woman dearly, and been happy with her. At forty, he could love a great many women passionately, and be happy with none of them. Face after face haunted him so persistently as to persuade him he had found anchorage at last for his roving heart; face after face palled and wearied in turn, none the slower because of its natural frowns when supplanted at short notice by a successor. In his lordship's case there is no doubt the cynical

aphorism held good that affirms "A man always believes his first love his last, and his last love his first."

Lady Goneril, with her incontestable beauty and strong affections, might have retained him longer had she not allowed him to perceive how necessary he was to her happiness. Mrs. Stripwell, again, a sufficiently heartless lady, with an excellent opinion of her own attractions, seemed likely to enjoy an uninterrupted reign in an empire of which, neither to herself nor others, would she admit the value. Lord St. Moritz not only admired her person, but professed to discover charms of mind to which other people, her own sex especially, were insensible. The truth is, she kept him in hot water. He could never be sure of her five minutes, however seriously he urged his suit.

It must be admitted that, with those rosy lips and white teeth, she looked best in merriment. So, when he was reproachful, she laughed; when he was sulky, she laughed; when he turned sentimental, and went in for heroics, as she called it, again she laughed, loud and long too, if he tried to extract romance from the situation. Altogether she must have been a most unsatisfactory idol, and but for the arrival of Beltenebrosa in London, and the veil of mystery that imparted to the new beauty a certain stimulating interest, might have remained, as far as I can tell, on her pedestal for years.

That she was utterly dethroned, nobody knew better than herself—except Lord St. Moritz. He was literally afraid to acknowledge the influence exercised over him by this dark, handsome woman he was travelling many score of miles to visit in her own home.

And her husband? Hardened as was his lordship, professing untenable opinions on marriage and its obligations, such as society consents to tolerate if not to excuse, he had yet enough left of that loyalty which is the essence of a gentleman's whole character, to feel many qualms of repugnance in shaking a man by the hand, in accepting his hospitality and sitting at his table, against whom he meditated a treachery of the blackest dye. It was done every day, he reflected, but it went against the grain, nevertheless; so he persuaded himself, as people generally do when embarked on an expedition of which their better selves disapprove, that he meant no harm after all!

Paravant could not feel cause for jealousy, or he would

never have sent the invitation. To decline it would have looked churlish, and implied consciousness of offence, besides being uncourteous to the lady, with whom, besides, there were many matters to talk over, involving discussion not of love, but of money. If she seemed happy, he would attend to swell her triumph; if sad, he must not be so unmanly as to desert her. Altogether he could not well have stayed away, and was glad he had made up his mind to come.

Alas, that his doubts and scruples, his wiser promptings, the reproaches and remonstrances of his noble nature, were all lost in the magic of Beltenebrosa's flashing eyes, and that, meeting their glance, as she left the dining-room, while restoring a fan and handkerchief not quite accidentally dropped, he felt with a certain reckless, unholy delight that he was more than ever her slave.

CHAPTER XXXV

ANOTHER MAGNUM

"YOU'LL find that pretty good lining," said the host, addressing himself more particularly to his lordship, as though conscious there had been some misunderstanding between them, which in his own house it was his first duty to set right. "It's sixty-four, and not bad of its kind. Here's your health, St. Moritz; I'm glad to see you in my tumbledown old place."

The other filled his glass and nodded cordially, thinking the while of what some fellow told him the other day at the Travellers about the Bedouins in their tents, and the bread-and-salt which constitutes so sacred a compact between an Arab and his guest.

"Tumbledown, do you call it? I wish you could see mine! You shall some day when I can afford to live in it. But these are the best-proportioned rooms I know, and so prettily furnished, too!"

"That's my wife's taste, I only go in for comfort. I hope you fellows *are* comfortable. How about the races to-morrow? I suppose we all go?"

"I do! I do! I do!" was repeated in a chorus of consent, varied only by the plaintive accents of Mrs. Tregarthen's dandy, who observed meekly, "I suppose I must!"

As he was the most reckless speculator of the whole party, "plunging heavily," to use his own words, "when he could see his way," this assumption of indifference seemed to be accepted for what it was worth.

"Let us count noses, then," said their host; "there's a special at eleven, and I can take you all to the station. Let me see, the brake, the pony-carriage, and the brougham for anybody who is afraid of getting wet. Yes, that's all easy enough."

The rector stared. He remembered a time when

Paravant's father kept nothing but a dog-cart, and painted his name on that in letters an inch long, to avoid the tax! Well, well, we live in a world of change! but for the present, this sixty-four was superlative, and the bottle had come round to him again!

He emptied it with such good-will that Paravant rang the bell on the instant for a magnum of the same, brought in with as much care as a baby in arms. Tongues began to wag. A discussion on to-morrow's handicap brought out much difference of opinion, and more than one betting-book. Ere the measure was half empty, several wagers had been entered, a point better or worse, than the current odds in the ring.

"Will the hurdle-race fill?" asked somebody, whereon Mrs. Tregarthen's dandy turned a fresh page and emptied his glass.

"It's a new thing altogether," observed Paravant, "but the farmers like it, and the country people. It gets together a few fifty-pound screws, and nobody cares if they break their necks or not. I've put one in for the fun of the thing."

"Quite right," said the large dandy; "very public-spirited. But you'll lose your entrance-money."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, they've brought Adonis down on purpose. I met Sloper at the station. They've got the race in their pocket."

"We must have a shy at him, for the honour of the West. He's a good horse, but I never liked his shoulders, and he's half worn-out."

"Will you lay against him?"

"Yes, if there's anything of a field—an even pony."

"Say five-to-four."

"Very well; five-to-four, in ponies."

So the wager was entered on both sides, and Paravant made a beginning.

"What is your horse's name?" asked Lord St. Moritz, more out of courtesy than from any real interest in the matter.

"Potboy," answered the host. "By Ganymede, out of Froth, half-bred—a useful hack, and that is about all."

"Will you back him?" asked the former speculator.

"I should want very long odds," answered Paravant doubtfully. "It's such an off-chance, if the others can stand

up; but the hurdles will be stiff, and the ground is slippery at the back of the course. I would take twenty-to-one."

"Twenty-to-one, my dear fellow! It's not twenty-to-one I finish this glass of claret! Who rides him?"

"Hum! that's another difficulty. It's too late to engage a jockey. I shall have to ride him myself."

"Impossible! You must be more than a stone over weight! You can't get that off in a single walk. I'll tell you what, if it's 'owner up,' I don't mind laying twelve-to-one—six-hundred-to-fifty. That's a choker, I think!"

"It is a mouthful, but I'll try to swallow it," answered Paravant, pencil in hand, while he rang the bell for another magnum, looking round to ask quietly, "Will anybody do it again?"

There is something in good claret, freely swallowed, especially provocative of speculation the night before a race—the large handsomely cut decanter came round to him again, their host had booked several more bets offered by his guests for smaller sums, and on a gradually decreasing scale of odds. Even the rector, though such hazardous investments were wholly out of his line, ventured a modest sovereign, on the success of his former pupil, backing him from a sense of loyalty and affection, with a strong idea he was likely to win. Forward James, after offering more wine, which was declined, followed the others to the drawing-room, chuckling to think of the heavy wagers for which he had "drawn" them, as he called it, and rejoiced especially over a certain hundred-pounds-to-ten laid him by Lord St. Moritz. If the little horse could only pull it off to-morrow, he would be free of his most vexatious liabilities. But he had ventured largely, it was a case of a man or a mouse, and he dared not anticipate the alternative, if it should come up mouse! The large dandy had no such apprehensions. Ten times in the year, at Epsom, at Ascot, at Goodwood, at all the Newmarket meetings, besides minor races, within the reach of London, he was in the habit of winning or losing his annual income in two days, with perfect equanimity and satisfaction, bringing to bear on the mere amusements of life an amount of memory, judgment, sagacity, and cool imperturbable good temper, that must have commanded success in its most important affairs. Taking to politics *might* save him, but no less engrossing occupation would ever wean him from the dangerous excitement of the turf.

Strolling, tall and stately, into the drawing-room, it was but natural that he should gravitate towards the handsomest woman in the company, and he took up a position by the side of his hostess. This arrangement not quite suiting the intentions of Beltenebrosa, she broke the party up into a looser formation, after coffee, suggesting whist and music, while she herself moved to a pianoforte at the other end of the room, whither she was followed, as she intended, by Lord St. Moritz.

Two people only took note of this manœuvre, with different feelings, but a strong sense of disapproval and disgust. The one was Mrs. Tregarthen, whose eyes were always pretty wide open, observing, indeed, many things which had no real existence; the other, Paravant himself, who turned away with a pang that he was ashamed to feel so keenly. Jealousy, contempt, and a sense of undeserved injury, probed him to the quick.

"I thought *that* was over," he said to himself, "or he never should have darkened my doors again. Hang it! after all, if a fellow can't trust his own wife in his own house, there's an end of everything!" and he walked uneasily into the adjoining room, where the Reverend Silas was playing whist with less skill than daring—the effect, no doubt, of that sound, full-bodied sixty-four.

No man who has been separated, for ever so short a time, from the lady he adored, should attempt to take up the thread of his attentions where he left off. I have remarked in church that the gentler sex always begin to yawn when a preacher says "to resume"; they like breaking fresh ground, even though they may know every inch of the soil; and, while they want to hear the same thing over and over again, are exceedingly intolerant of an admirer who repeats it in the same words. Lord St. Moritz was far too good a judge to offend in this way; he spoke in an audible voice, and ventured on nothing more compromising than the following inoffensive question:—

"Is it far to the course—and what time do you mean to start?"

"I'm not going."

"Not going, signora! you only say that to bully me. What have I done?"

"Bully you! I haven't the heart. But I'm not going to the races, all the same."

"Why?"

"Fancy asking a woman *why!* Perhaps I've got a cold. Perhaps I've not got a new dress. No; I don't mind telling you. The railway gives me a headache—one can't come away when one's tired—Mr. Paravant is going to ride—and I hate the whole thing!"

Now this was far from the truth. Beltenebrosa saw very sufficient reason for absenting herself from Swansdown Races in the certainty that her gipsy kin would attend. Her resources had been already overtaxed by the repeated extortions of Jericho Lee, and she would give him no opportunity of frightening her into bribery that she could avoid.

"I looked forward so to going with *you*," said his lordship plaintively. "We might have banked together, and been so happy, and won a lot of money!"

"You are always thinking of money!"

"People say 'For love or money,'" he answered, drawing closer. "I know which I think of *here*."

Striking a chord on the instrument so deep as to drown her words for all but him, she replied, "Base coin, sham notes, false hearts! Nobody is to be trusted. I said in my haste all men are— What?"

"You may depend on *me*," he murmured. "Oh! why will you not believe in my"—

She rattled off a lively air, up and down the keys, that brought half a dozen guests round to listen, as she well knew it would, and, looking mischievously in his disconcerted face, asked him if she should sing him a song.

What could he answer but that it would be delightful?

"And the subject?" she continued.

"Love, of course," he whispered.

"No. Money!—gold and silver. Listen, my lord, and learn your lesson, and don't forget it another time!

GOLD AND SILVER.

"Oh, pretty Miss Disdainful, at whose feet I love to rest,
You will not speak, but fling me down the rosebud from your breast!
And prove the Eastern proverb is as truthful as it's old,
Which tells us speech is silver, but that silence, dear, is gold."

"Oh, pleasant Sir Persistent, you have talk enough for both,
And though you swore, yet none the more, I'll trust you on your oath;
For mamma has often warned me, that she certainly should scold,
If she caught me taking silver when I paid for it in gold!"

"I looked forward so to being with you"

"But I would like to deck you out in jewels rich and rare,
The ruby round your finger and the diamond in your hair;
And I would give you love for love, and access uncontrolled
To all my store, and ten times more, of silver and of gold."

"I wish I could believe you, dear, 'twould gladden me, I own;
Or you had never brought me here, so late, and all alone.
Yet thus to meet is more than sweet, and moonlight makes one bold,
Although it's only silver, love, the sunlight's really gold!"

The moon retired; the pallid dawn flushed softly into day,
And pleasant Sir Persistent went rejoicing on his way;
But Miss Disdainful dropped a tear; the tale has oft been told—
Man scatters silver fast enough, but woman pays in gold!

"Then Sir Persistent won!" observed Lord St. Moritz.

"A man always wins," she answered, "if he means to win. Some people don't know what they like; some don't like what they know, and so the world goes round!"

The large dandy, who had been playing whist, now came forward to express his approval, and soon the company were gathered round the pianoforte, all but one.

"She sings for him, not me!" thought Paravant, with a bitter sense of pique and humiliation, that he felt ashamed to think, had he been a woman, would have found relief in tears. "And this is what one gets in return for all kinds of trouble and vexation, for entertaining a lot of people one don't care two straws about, for no end of expense, and the loss of that liberty which a fellow never appreciates till it's gone. Ah! better have remained a bachelor. Hang it! I didn't know when I was well off!"

But he had little time for these gloomy reflections. There was Mrs. Tregarthen to pack into a nondescript carriage waiting to take her home, candles to light for the ladies, wine-and-water to offer, good-nights to exchange, and a dreary tobacco parliament to dissolve before he could retire to his room, sullen, heartsick, hopeless, deriving only a spurious consolation from the prospect of excitement arising out of bodily peril to-morrow in the coming hurdle-race.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE PACE THAT KILLS

"MY DEAR PARAVANT,—A horrible headache and premonitory twinges of gout will keep me a prisoner, while you are all amusing yourselves at Swansdown. I wish you luck, though I did lay against the blue and yellow.—Yours truly, ST. MORITZ.

"I don't think the claret is to blame. I was seedy when I left London."

"Is Lord St. Moritz getting up?" asked his host of the footman who handed him this missive at breakfast.

The footman, true to his order, did not know; but, on inquiry, it appeared his lordship's valet had taken a cup of tea to his lordship, who was not to be disturbed till he rang.

Forward James looked very black, directing angry scowls at Beltenebrosa behind her tea and coffee pots, the reason for which will presently appear. He ate nothing, but drank a brandy-and-soda—very weak of the soda.

"Muzzle on, I see," observed the large dandy, glowing in health and vigour from his morning tub, with an excellent appetite for this as for all other meals. "That wasting is simply torture while it lasts. 'Pon my soul, though I say it that shouldn't, you deserve to win for your pluck!"

"I'll have a shy," said the other, "if I lose my stick!" but he answered mechanically, and as if he attached no particular meaning to his words, leaving the room thereafter with fixed eye and wandering step, like one who is stunned by a blow. Ten minutes later, when the carriages came round, he appeared in his wife's boudoir, where he was sure to find her alone, and carefully shut the door.

"What's the meaning of this?" he began, in a loud, angry voice, with an offensive assumption of authority, that roused Beltenebrosa into rebellion at once.

"I ought to ask *you* that question," she replied haughtily. "If you choose to forget you are a gentleman, don't forget that I am a"—

"A d——d gipsy foundling!" he interrupted furiously. "A thing I picked out of the gutter, and washed, and cleaned, and dressed up in silks and satins, and— No. I'm not going to lose my temper, and use bad language. I have nothing to say but this: It's a plant. Oh! a devilish good plant, Mrs. Paravant; but I'm up to it! I suspected there was something in it all through. I'm not such a fool as people think. You wouldn't go to the races. Oh no! You were afraid of the gipsies; that was a capital excuse. And it makes you nervous to see me ride. *Me!* You never cared a curse for me! I might have known it all along. You won't be nervous, alone, with that smooth-tongued scoundrel who is shamming ill upstairs at this moment on purpose to stay at home with you. I've got an account to settle with *him*, too; but that can keep cold. I'll win his hundred first—he hates parting —and then we'll square up!"

He stopped, more, I believe, from want of breath than grievances; and Beltenebrosa, while justly indignant, could not but feel something of respect for this frank, impetuous nature, flying out in a passion honestly like a child.

"Mr. Paravant," said she, "your language and behaviour are what I am not accustomed to, and do not intend to endure. Something has put you out. You are very much excited at this moment. I hope you will come back in a better humour and beg my pardon."

Her coolness drove him wild.

"Pardon!" he gasped, choking with rage. "By Jove, that is too good a joke! When I come back, too! Now listen to me. I *order* you, madam, to come with us to the races. The carriage is at the door. Put your bonnet on this instant, and jump in!"

"I will not!"

He was at his wits'-end, looking from side to side, as if to find some physical engine of coercion. In vain. The bridle has not yet been invented to control a woman enraged with a man for whom she has no respect.

His distress was so pitiful that she could not help continuing, with something of contempt, "I'll go and spend the day at the Vicarage, or the Castle, if you like, but to the races, I repeat, I will not go!"

"The Vicarage! It's barely half a mile from this door. The Castle! They've got a party on purpose, and will be gone to the course. No. You can't gammon me! It's

all of a piece, and I ought not to be surprised ; but though I knew I had married a gipsy I didn't think I had married a "—

"Stop!" she exclaimed. "There are insults I will not submit to! You had better go—now—at once!"

"And never come back? Nothing you would like better! How pleased you'd be if I were to break my neck!"

He had goaded her beyond self-command, and she replied hastily, "What do I care whether you break it or not?"

"Then I hope to God I may!" said poor Paravant, in a thick hoarse voice, and bending down his flushed and swollen forehead, he lifted, literally, the hem of her garment and pressed it to his lips, but he was gone before she could speak a word. And though she followed, calling after him in the passage, he never stopped nor turned his head, but sprang to the box of the brake, which he drove himself, and started his horses down the avenue at the rate of fifteen miles an hour.

Lord St. Moritz, in a dressing-gown, watching from his window, saw a footman run after the carriage, which he failed to overtake, with his master's overcoat, nor did he think of forwarding this garment by the pony-carriage or brougham, as they followed in due succession ; but this characteristic negligence interested his lordship not at all. He made an elaborate toilet, and descended the stairs in about an hour, with every hope and intention of spending an agreeable afternoon. He was disappointed not to find Mrs. Paravant in the drawing-room, surprised to search library, boudoir, and conservatory in vain, perplexed and angry when he discovered, by personal inspection, that she was neither in the house, the garden, nor in the grounds. Not till luncheon was getting cold did a servant inform him that she had left home before twelve o'clock.

Haunted by a foreboding of evil, that oppressed her as the coming thunderstorm seems to stifle us, while outward nature remains calm and tranquil in the heavy atmosphere of a sultry day, Beltenebrosa was now more than twenty miles off, threading a path she remembered only too well, that led from Brimscombe Station, through Brimscombe Brake, direct to Swansdown racecourse. Would she get there in time? That was the one idea, to which everything on earth seemed of secondary importance. The hurdle-

race was fixed for three o'clock. Would she get there in time? She must speak to him again before he weighed and mounted. There was a look in his face, while he kissed her dress, that she feared to see all her life long, every night in her dreams. Three o'clock already! Her watch must be too fast! She had a mile farther to walk. Would she be there in time? Would she be there in time?

Her first impulse had been to run after him, as he left the house, but before she could put her bonnet on, the guests departed, and took all the carriages, so it was impossible to catch the special train. Another would follow later, and Bradshaw told her it ought to reach Brimscombe by half-past two. It arrived there late, of course, and no vehicle could be got for love or money; everything on wheels was at the races. She had walked from Combe-Wester to the railway—it was no slight tax on her pedestrian powers to finish her task at the rate of nearly five miles an hour; but in her preoccupation she was wholly insensible to bodily fatigue, and if she gave a thought to her efforts, it was only to exult in the symmetry of shape and perfect physical organisation that enabled her to cover the ground with such swift, easy strides.

"A gipsy!" she said to herself, rather bitterly. "You needn't have reproached me with that! It's lucky I *am* a gipsy—*pur sang*—I'm not ashamed of it. One of your fair, florid, flabby women would have failed a mile back, and been too late!"

Lord St. Moritz never entered her head but once, and then she almost laughed aloud to picture his vexation and disappointment. From her husband's intemperate reproaches, she gathered enough to understand the trick his lordship intended to play, for which she gave him credit, all being fair in love and war; but there was something about the rapidity of this baffling countermarch that amused her exceedingly, and for a moment she lost sight of her own anxiety in the humour of the situation.

It soon came back with redoubled force. As she drew near the racecourse and heard the shouts of the people, she rushed forward, forgetting her fatigue, her wild appearance, her disordered dress, even the dreaded gipsy-folk, lost to every consideration, but the one maddening possibility that she might be too late after all.

The hurdles were up, she marked them a bow-shot off. How white and dangerous they looked, grinning at her, as

it were, in cruel mockery and reproach! The horses had already started. Their rapid hoof-beat sounded like thunder in her ears, the whirl and flutter of those many-coloured silks baffled and confused her sight; but with straining eyes she made out the blue and yellow cap hurrying to the front, as he reached the last leap but one —breathless, faint, with parted lips and clenched hands, her every faculty, her whole being absorbed in a painful intensity of suspense.

Now although the knowledge and attention of an experienced trainer had rendered the little horse perfectly fit to contend in any struggle exacting wind, speed, and sustained muscular exertion, his jockey was in the worst possible frame of mind to ride the kind of race that especially requires coolness, patience, and temper, to ensure success. Potboy did not gallop a quarter of a mile in the rush and hurry of a crowded start without protesting, in his own way, against the violent, intemperate handling of his master. Always a free horse, an angry jerk of the bridle and a stab with the spurs maddened him to recklessness, and he broke fairly out of control, making the running over the first two flights of hurdles at a speed not inaptly described as alarming by those who witnessed it from the stand. Such pace, however, sobered the animal, while it seemed to intoxicate the rider, and though a timely pull, even now, a mile from the winning-post, would have done good service, as Potboy began to flag, Paravant only hustled him along the faster.

"Like all these gentleman-jockeys," said the rider of Adonis, dismounting a few minutes later, with a shake of his crafty head, "in too great a hurry to get home!"

Beltenebrosa, leaning against a post that supported the fifth leap,—four honest feet of sawn timber, pegged and secured on ground as hard as a dining-room table,—must have seen, though she was never able to describe, exactly what happened. The blue and yellow cap came at it very fast, but Potboy swayed and wavered from the direct line in a form that warned experienced eyes he was beginning to fail.

"Catch hold of his head, for God's sake!" exclaimed a bystander.

"Come up!" shouted Paravant, deaf, or at least in no way responding to the appeal. A horse so extended was unable to spring. Potboy tried to stop himself, took off,

half a stride too late, got under the hurdles, struck them with his chest, and turned completely over in the same moment that Beltenebrosa, wondering why a mountain of green grass should rise to meet the sky, fainted dead away.

She was spared a sickening sight. That complicated ball of girths, shoes, gleaming spurs, white breeches, blue, yellow, and chestnut, with a crowd of black figures swarming round like insects on an ant-hill, presently resolved itself into horse and rider, the one rising with a snort and shake to gallop wildly on after its comrades through a lane of shouting hundreds, reins dangling, stirrups flapping, head and tail up, staring from side to side, as conscious of something fatally amiss, the other lying limp and still, froth on his lip, eyes dim and glazed, mouth open, hands clenched, looking as if he was never to speak or move again!

The race was won by an outsider. No more casualties occurred at the last hurdle, near the distance, which the chestnut, cantering conscientiously in with his empty saddle, leaped temperately and well, though crossed by Adonis still fresh and full of running, the jockey of that successful plater having, at this crisis, displayed much presence of mind and fertility of resource.

As long as Potboy was leading he kept far in the rear, meaning to lose so much ground as it would be impossible to regain, when he made his final effort, with any appearance of honesty and no chance of success. But the chestnut being disposed of, the others, who had been a good deal scattered, made the pace so ridiculously bad, that such a horse as Adonis could not have come in but as a winner, without provoking a row on the racecourse, and an appeal to the stewards. Therefore did this consummate equestrian and rogue pull his horse out of the course at the last hurdle, make his effort at the right moment, finish splendidly, and win by three-quarters of a length, to be subsequently disqualified for going the wrong side of the post.

"The beggar always had one side to his mouth," said a stableman, out of place, to Jericho Lee, when the decision of the authorities was made known.

"Very likely," answered the gipsy, who had frequented races all his life, and generally kept his eyes open; "but he'd got a bridle in it, and might have been held straight on the other!"

And Jericho swore, wishing he had known in time which way the money was, so as to have stood in with the robbery, and pocketed his share of its spoils. He felt aggrieved, ill-used, and, to use his own expression, down on his luck. Fighting Jack was not yet out of prison. Nance had made but little profit by fortune-telling, and the gentleman from whom, through his gipsy wife, he had hoped to extort a decent annuity, was as good as dead.

CHAPTER XXXVII

TOO LATE

"HE'S spoke at last, ma'am. He's asked for you!"

Beltenebrosa had left the darkened room, his mother's room, where her husband lay senseless, but for a few minutes, after watching him day and night since his accident forty-eight hours ago. Paravant's old nurse had been sent from Combe-Appleton to attend on him, by the forethought of Mrs. Tregarthen, whose own services were at the disposal of anyone in real distress, though she forebore to press them at Combe-Wester in such a crisis as the present.

The last two days cast a gloom over the village and surrounding district. People began to acknowledge merits in the sufferer to which they had been hitherto blind enough. Each man told his neighbour, as if it were a brilliant discovery, that "there was a deal of good in him and for his part he always liked the young squire!" It mattered very little now.

Everything had been done after the accident that care and kindness could suggest. The London guests behaved with delicacy and consideration. The large dandy even spent a night in the public-house near Combe-Wester gate, that he might be on the spot should his host or hostess find any use for him in their trouble. Lord St. Moritz did not venture to request an interview with the latter. He caught sight of her face while she followed her shattered, unconscious husband up the staircase, and it fairly frightened him. So altered and warped were its

lineaments, that he glanced instinctively at her hair, to make sure it had not turned grey!

There was a surgeon standing on the racecourse, within a hundred yards of where the accident happened. This man slept at Combe-Wester, and scarcely left his patient for an hour. He had taken off limbs, tied up arteries, studied his noble art, and helped his fellow-creatures to live and die in every climate under heaven. He possessed the skill, the tact, the readiness of resource, and, above all, the iron nerve we so seldom see wanting in his profession; but his stout heart ached for the agony he read too plainly in Mrs. Paravant's stony gaze.

"It won't last long," he whispered to the old nurse, moving about with streaming eyes, in her clean cap and neat white apron. "But you'll have another patient to look after when you've done with your master, or I'm very much mistaken. Get her to eat and drink something, my good woman. There's little hope for one, but it won't do to lose both!"

He told his wife afterwards, that the steadiness with which Mrs. Paravant assisted him in all necessary details was the worst symptom of her case. There seemed something so unnatural in a composure that he attributed less to the Oriental blood in her veins than to the misery of a crushing and stupefying despair.

How trifling now seemed the little faults and shortcomings of that departing wayfarer, bound on the inevitable journey from which there is no return! Could she have foreseen such a time as this, would she ever have had the heart to feel vexed with him for treading on her dress, asking the wrong people to dinner, prosing about his horses, growling when she kept him waiting, or such everyday marital imperfections common to husbands of every class? If he could but come back from the brink—that awful brink, on the borders of—where?—only come back one step, she would never be provoked with him again! She would be such a true, and kind, and obedient wife, giving him all her thoughts, confidences, affections—loving him—yes, loving him—as a mother loves her child, it may be, rather than as a woman loves her lord. She could have cried aloud with pain and remorse when she recalled the scene in the boudoir, and the pitiful look in his honest eyes, never again, perhaps, to meet her own.

Would he die without forgiving her? Beltenebrosa went down on her knees to pray.

It is not for us to judge how far the unaccustomed spirit can lend itself to devotion habitually neglected, and only resorted to as the outcry of anguish too keen to bear alone. She grew calmer, at least, while imploring help from Heaven, and nerved herself to carry the burden laid on her as best she might.

Yes, we ought to be kind to each other here, in the little segment of a circle which, as an infinitesimal portion of eternity, we have accustomed ourselves to call life. We are but tenants at will. Is it worth while to fret, and strive, and malign our neighbour within such narrow borders, when every morning's post may bring us notice to quit?

For Paravant to-day, as may befall you and me to-morrow, and many more of us before the week is out, a summons had been served. A noiseless step halted on the threshold, and there was somebody knocking at the door.

"He's asked for you."

She glanced in the old nurse's face, and her poor heart stood still. There was something about the woman's mouth and chin that told its own tale. Beltenebrosa felt she had cherished more than a spark of hope, that seemed extinguished now for the first time.

Her husband lay in his mother's room on the bed in which he was born. Over the fireplace hung a picture of himself and his pony, aged six each—a bright, sturdy, bold-faced boy, a short-legged pony that looked as if nothing could throw it down. The nurse remembered how he insisted on sleeping in his new boots the night before his first day's hunting. It brought a fresh burst of tears to the old eyes, that might have been dry now, so freely had they wept for a lifetime over the sorrows of others and their own.

When Beltenebrosa re-entered the sickroom she was bringing out some bandages, softly, skilfully, and with that indescribable soothing air only attained by those who are accustomed to children, ministering to their little wants and troubles as they arise. Forward James had regained consciousness. There was recognition of his wife in those sunken eyes, and he moved the unshattered arm that lay on the coverlet, as though he would have raised it in a

caress if he could. One moment her heart leaped up, the next it seemed to fall like a wounded bird, that flutters and dies out. It needed no experience of deathbeds to read the meaning of that glitter in his eyes, those lines in his wasted, chiselled face.

"I never knew my boy was so beautiful," thought his old nurse. "He's as like his poor mother as he can stare. She's an angel in heaven now."

He moved his lips. Beltenebrosa bent her head to listen. One of her long black locks fell across his hand, and the poor thin fingers fastened on it, moving it in and out with a feeble, loving touch.

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" sobbed the broken-hearted woman; "forgive me, forgive me. My punishment is greater than I can bear."

He whispered something she did not catch. Precious, indeed, were those syllables she used to think of such small account. How could she ever have wearied of that voice, so soon to be mute for evermore!

The nurse, moving softly round the bed, put some cordial to his wan lips, and they curved in a weak, wavering smile.

"Good-bye, Bel!" he whispered. "Don't cry, dear. We didn't get on so bad. Good-bye."

Even such slight effort seemed to exhaust him, and for a space he lay motionless, her hand in his. So quiet was his breathing, she thought more than once it was all over. The excruciating pains of his return to consciousness had left him; he was easier now, and comparatively comfortable. The surgeon knew, and so did the nurse, this respite only anticipated eternal tranquillity in the grave.

There came a quiver on the wasted features, so white, so waxen, so sadly beautiful. At last a tremble like that which stirs some lonely pool in the cold breath of a December dawn. Their hands were locked. Leaning over him, she looked into his eyes with hungry, hopeless longing. Alas! they were already blank in the coming forgetfulness. Something to *her*—some charge to be held sacred for all time, the outcome of a kindly nature, struggling up through failing senses and clouded brain.

"It wasn't the little horse's fault," he murmured. "I put on too much steam. Take care of Potboy."

Then his fingers twined round her own, tighter, tighter,

"Forgive me, forgive me."

till gradually the grasp relaxed, the eye rolled and grew dim, the jaw dropped, and James Paravant floated peacefully away into the unknown, leaving behind him but a crushed and mangled husk of that which three days ago was a fresh, bright, athletic young man, barely turned twenty-three.

If carriages could have consoled his widow she would have had comfort enough. There must have been forty at the funeral, while the labourers of his own and an adjoining parish, walking six abreast, formed a procession half a mile long. Certain Foresters, too, and other friendly clubs, attended in imposing order, wearing green bows and marching with due solemnity, though more or less in drink. Neighbouring public-houses did a good stroke of business, for grief, and more especially sympathy, is apt to be thirsty on a hot autumn day. Even the sexton's nose was red, while the Reverend Silas, with wet eyes and broken voice, could hardly get through the touching burial-service of his Church ; and one of the school-children, a soft-hearted little maid of six, throwing flowers on the coffin, blubbered aloud. The rector had a large congregation the following Sunday, who would have been much disappointed had he failed to touch on the recent calamity in his discourse.

He drew a parallel, therefore, fetching it from a considerable distance, between Absalom and their late neighbour, alluding also to the ancestors of the deceased, one of whom was reposing in effigy outside his tomb in that very church, cross-legged and hugging his sword like a bold Crusader, in stone, and insisted, with questionable taste, that this too, the last of the Paravants, had died gallantly in his spurs.

A flight that seemed exceedingly appropriate to old Reuben Rasper, formerly a roughrider, till constant drink was found to be incompatible with that profession, who expressed approval of the preacher's oratory, observing with some reason that "'Twas mortal true ; an' ev squire hadn't a-had on *they* (meaning the persuaders), 'ad a-bin 'loive and kickin', mebbe, now!"

So Forward James died and was buried, and this was his R.I.P.

Book IV

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ALL ALONE

FORGOTTEN? Not immediately; yet sooner, perhaps, than anyone who attended his funeral might have expected. Even when the finest oak in the park has been blown down, the gap in our landscape seems filled up before we have time to appreciate the loss. How much less likely are we to miss some useless sapling, broken at an obscure corner of the wood!

In less than three months Combe-Wester was let, with a special agreement for the sumptuous board and lodging of Potboy, to a worthy family, whose transactions do not enter into this history. James Paravant's affairs, having been placed in the hands of an Exeter attorney, were found exceedingly difficult of arrangement. His furniture was sold, his house dismantled, his hatchment taken down, his chimneys were swept, and his widow was gone.

The utter prostration following so stunning a blow was succeeded by an interval of sharp, sickening pain, that passed away in turn, the more quickly, perhaps, for its acute severity, and Beltenebrosa soon found herself equal to the task of grappling with a thousand difficulties that beset her on every side. These were so far beneficial that they served to distract her mind from the one overwhelming sorrow, and every hour of such forgetfulness was so much gain of strength and vitality, like the relief afforded by anodynes to a throbbing wound.

Poor James Paravant had lived, since his marriage, at a rate to which his income, multiplied by ten, would have been wholly inadequate. There was money owing for everything. The funds he had raised were always wanted to settle his account on those black Mondays, at Tattersall's, when we see men in hansoms hurrying to Albert Gate,

with such varying expressions of countenance. His new furniture was unpaid for, so were the alterations in his house. The very wages of day-labourers and farm-servants were months in arrear, and Beltenebrosa, assisted by the Exeter attorney, had to pacify, for she could not satisfy, a score of creditors, one-third of whom it was impossible to pay in full.

Her gipsy blood did her good service in such an emergency. The nature she derived from her ancestors stiffened itself, as it were, against mental suffering, bearing sorrow with something of that quiet, dogged defiance it would have opposed to bodily pain. She entertained, too, their elastic principles, on certain notions of probity and honour, which are apt to hamper the arrangements of an insolvent, and she had no scruples in driving hard bargains with struggling tradesmen, who seemed fain to accept the present tangible crown, in discharge of a visionary and uncertain pound, to which they were entitled. The Exeter attorney could not disguise his admiration.

"What a head for business!" he was heard to exclaim. "What memory! What a knowledge of mankind! And then such manners, such a presence, such a figure! Five feet seven in her stockings if she's an inch! Walks like a queen! Black as midnight! Mag—nificent!"

And he rubbed his hands, chuckling, thinking, perhaps, what a partner she would have made in his office, *bien entendu*—not his parlour, for the little man was blessed with an ample wife of his own, and, as it is called in the West, a *long* family of children.

But when papers without end had been opened, examined, and tied up, docketed and put away, when outstanding debts had been estimated, and accounts finally balanced, it was still found that shillings could not be made to represent half-crowns; and that a very few hundreds a year must suffice the widow to live on out of a fortune valued by acquaintances, with their accustomed liberality, at some thousands. So few, indeed, that even now, though she sold her jewels, she could not raise the amount of her debt to Mervyn Strange, brooding over it from day to day, with mingled feelings of shame, remorse, and a certain unacknowledged satisfaction that the one link between them remained unbroken still.

When all her business was concluded, and the attorney had gone back to Exeter, Beltenebrosa decided to live in

London, choosing to make her home in the great metropolis for many good reasons that she admitted, and one she did not.

It was the cheapest place for a lone woman, and the most independent, so she told herself a hundred times; also here, less than elsewhere, would she be exposed to the incursions of her kinsfolk; but she forebore to remind herself that in the capital her period of mourning need not necessarily be one of privation and utter seclusion, and that it would be pleasant to meet, if only for a minute, while they smiled a "How-d'ye-do?" the faces—amongst others that of Lord St. Moritz—she used to see in happier times. Even for a beauty dethroned, or at anyrate in a period of apogee, it seems consolatory to occupy the ground of former victories; besides, London is a large place, where people run against each other every day, and nobody a bit the wiser, particularly in the dead time of the year.

Was she hankering after Lord St. Moritz still? I think it probable. I think, even if she found no room for tenderer feelings, she longed for the excitement of his company, the amusement of his conversation. Perhaps, too, his lordship's professions of devotion having always been as fervent as she would permit, the possibility may have crossed her mind of a presentation at Court in the right of an English peeress, conferring high and undisputed rank amongst the very people of whom last season she got tired in six weeks. It would be rather nice, besides, to have a coronet on her handkerchiefs and the panels of her carriages.

If so, she reckoned without her host. More than one of her sex, and many of his own, could have told her how, warned perhaps by domestic experience, St. Moritz, as regarded the marriage-yoke, was like one of those refractory horses that no persuasion will induce to accept the servitude of harness. The fairest hands in London had tried to caparison him without avail. None, so to speak, could get the collar quite over his ears. He winced, started back, slipped his head out, reared up, turned round and galloped away! So long as a lady could not possibly be made his wife, for the incontestable reason that she was married to somebody else, so long did his lordship worship at her shrine with touching devotion, bewailing his own hard lot and hers in the choicest phrases and the sweetest tones.

He was never more agreeable than when lachrymose. Like a wet cloth passed over a picture, melancholy seemed to bring out the soft touches and tender shades of his character, and he could turn from grave to gay with a quaint, half-pathetic humour, exceedingly agreeable to women, who thoroughly enjoy an excited, half-hysterical state, in which they don't know whether to laugh or to cry. But no sooner did the slender fingers close to secure their prize, than the cheat became apparent, the bubble burst, and it appeared that his lordship was neither true, nor even base metal, but only quicksilver after all.

When a decent term of mourning expired, and Mrs. Tregarthen had written to inquire after her welfare in choice language, offering condolence, advice, and even hints, if necessary, of assistance, Beltenebrosa found herself wondering why Lord St. Moritz made no sign. We may be sure she gave directions for her letters to be forwarded from Combe-Wester. Yet day after day passed without bringing a line. In London, where humanity is persecuted with a post every two hours, their very frequency renders the heart callous to such disappointments; but Beltenebrosa, who was beginning to feel lonely and a good deal tired of her own society, would have been cheered by a glance at the familiar handwriting, of which she kept more than one specimen hidden away in a repository of her own. She looked at these often enough, reading them over with interest rather than emotion, never kissing them with wet eyes, as she did a bit of silver paper containing a morsel of poor Paravant's coarse brown hair; and yet she could not help telling herself she had cared for neither of these—the faithless lover nor the foolish husband, as it was in her nature to care for Somebody, with a capital S, if that Somebody only came to ask for what was already more than half his own.

Yes, I appeal to ladies with grown-up daughters, fond fathers doting on one whom they dread to lose; chaperons, indeed, of all weights and ages, whether any amount of care or anxiety will preserve their pullet from its clutches, when the real falcon-gentle is seen hovering in the sky. For fowl of every other feather she is amenable to caution. Rank, wealth, and renown, spurs, bouquets, and compliments, lord, and squire, and knight of the shire, she can resist them, one and all, till swift, sure, and silent, down slides the bird of fate. A swoop, a stir, a little timid chirp,

a ruffling of callow feathers, and the hawk takes possession of its own. Why? For this simple reason, that whatever characters may be engraved on his card, the visitor's real name is Mr. Right!

But at this period a morning-call would have been exceedingly welcome to Beltenebrosa, whether from Mr. Right or Mr. Wrong. She rented a pretty set of rooms in the far west of Western London, with an idea that it would be delightful to avail herself of Kensington Gardens, the walks by the Serpentine, and such romantic solitudes, but seldom took advantage of them after all. It was a retreat in which a middle-aged person, who had done with the excitements and preferred the comforts of life, might have been happy enough, but after a few weeks the old restlessness took possession of her. And though she was too proud to make any appeal to, or inquiries about, Lord St. Moritz, and only knew that he was in town by the merest accident, having been obliged to pass through the street in which he lived, where she saw his carriage at the door, she would have liked to know something about his doings, and found herself wishing more than once for that enchanted mirror, in which the magician showed gentle Surrey the image of his ladye-love, indulging in the dangerous and reprehensible practice of reading in bed by candlelight. Not that he could have found fault with her, as—

> All in her night-robe loose she lay reclined,
> And pensive read, from tablet eburnine,
> Some strain that seemed her inmost heart to find—
> That favoured strain was Surrey's raptured line,
> That fair and lovely form, the Lady Geraldine.

Nevertheless, it is just as well the mirror has been long since broken. Few of us would be greeted with so pleasing an apparition as met the noble Howard. Could Beltenebrosa's dark eyes have pierced through a mile or so of bricks and mortar, and the walls of a pretty little house in Mayfair, she would indeed have beheld the form of Lord St. Moritz, well-dressed and *débonnaire* as usual, but might scarcely have approved, though both seemed agreeable enough, of his situation or his companion.

The latter was neither reading nor pensive, and so far from lying reclined in a loose night-robe, was standing upright, with one foot on the fender, in the scantiest of morning-dresses, drawn very tight at its skirt, and

representing the popular notion of a mermaid. So close a garment, in such an attitude, did justice to the exquisite proportions of the siren—no other than Mrs. Stripwell, in her little drawing-room, at five o'clock tea.

His lordship made a remark to that effect, expressing admiration of her exterior, and the lady laughed as usual.

"I'm glad you like it," said she; "it's an old rag I've worn for ages. I thought I had given it to my maid. You've seen it often enough."

"Never till to-day, I could take my solemn oath. Do you think I forget what you wear, or what you say, or what you do, or what you don't? I sometimes wish I could!"

"Humbug! Don't be sentimental. I remember now, the last time you saw me in it you had eyes only for that negro-woman with the queer name. You needn't pretend to forget. You know you quarrelled with me for calling her Aunt Sally. What's become of her? Gone back to the Gold Coast?"

His heart smote him. It was injudicious to remind him of a lost love, that he had no idea where to find. The very hopelessness of its renewal gave a zest to the memory of his past attachment, and Mrs. Stripwell had better have conformed to a cautious proverb that bids us "Let sleeping dogs lie."

"Why do you call her a negro-woman? She is an Italian. Poor thing! Don't you know she lost her husband in the autumn?"

"Did she? I wish I could lose mine. He's *too* tiresome. Wrote to say he should be back from Melton yesterday, and telegraphs this afternoon that he won't be here for a fortnight."

"I'm sure he's not much in your way when he *is* here."

"You don't know. But that's a different question. What I hate is being put out in my arrangements. If I had known, I could have gone with you to-night to the Nonsuch. I should like to see this new thing; they say it's good fun."

"You can come now. I'll order stalls at once."

"But I promised Algy to dine with his mother and sisters."

"Throw him over."

"How like a man! I'm not sure I shan't, all the same. I hear that conceited Mr. Delapré makes up into a capital

gipsy. Good gracious, Lord St. Moritz! it has just dawned on me. Your heart is hankering after the dark people still. I believe your black love is a gipsy. That's why you want to go to-night!"

"How very unfair! I was going on purpose to take you."

"But poor little Algy will break his heart if I disappoint him. You can't think how he feels it, dear thing."

This was an opportunity to carry the war into the enemy's country, "little Algy," as she called him, being a stalwart Guardsman six feet high, whom Mrs. Stripwell had promoted to her service during the temporary inconstancy of Lord St. Moritz, much to the disturbance and detriment of a fine young officer. The poor boy was horribly in love, and, it is needless to say, very miserable, suffering in such hands the tortures that render men hereafter women-haters for life. What volumes might be written on the wrongs reciprocally inflicted by the sexes, and the inevitable combats in which wounds are dealt freely and quarter so sparingly shown. Happily these rallies are soon over, for they seem very sharp while they last, and "the weakest must go to the wall."

"I wish you would let poor little Algy alone. You told me you had broken with him, and described the scene, which must have been tiresome enough. How can you go on playing fast and loose? It's not fair on him—or me!"

"*You!*" she laughed out in perfect good-humour, "of all people in the world, to complain of one's having two strings to one's bow! Now, don't be selfish, and don't be exacting! I only want to see the second thing, and it begins at nine. I'll dine with Algy's belongings first, and go to the play afterwards with *you*, there!"

"Shall you bring your dear Algy? If so, I had better take an additional stall."

"Nonsense! You know quite well I shall do nothing of the kind. Now you must go, for I expect mamma. Fancy her lecturing me yesterday about Somebody! Ain't you flattered?"

"I hope mamma's warning had the usual effect, if I am the Somebody."

"Don't be conceited. Send round to let me know the numbers of our stalls, before I go to dinner."

"I'll wait for you at the door. You won't like going into the theatre alone."

"How chivalrous! It's rather nice of you too. Good-bye."

So Lord St. Moritz took Bond Street on the way to his club, and secured two stalls for that night's performance at the Nonsuch, missing by five minutes a dark, handsome woman in deep mourning, who had been scanning a ground-plan of the theatre with much attention, professing an earnest desire to witness from the front row a new melo-drama, called *Gipsy John; or, The Romany's Revenge.*

CHAPTER XXXIX

A NEW PLAY

BELTENEBROSA enjoyed the theatre like a child. Her experience of dramatic amusements was exceedingly limited, but she loved the stage from her heart, even to the glare of the footlights and smell of the gas. Taking her walks abroad, she had seen certain shrivelled old men parading Regent Street, placarded before and behind with advertisements of the new melodrama, in letters six inches long. It looked very tempting, particularly as she had, in every sense of the word, been behind the scenes of the little theatre which, according to the papers, overflowed nightly with applauding spectators of *Gipsy John; or, The Romany's Revenge.* Such a title, too, enlisted her sympathies and suggested amusement. It would be curious, she thought, to observe how far, with the assistance of dress, decoration, gaslight, and the actor's art, dramatic life could be made to differ from real. She promised herself a treat, and resolved not to be disappointed.

Wearing deep mourning, with all its details, from her jet earrings to her black fan, in the best possible taste, Beltenebrosa took her place in the front row, next the orchestra, soon after the Nonsuch had opened its doors, to sit through some flimsy dance-music and rather a heavy farce, with commendable patience and good-humour. She felt like a miner who emerges into the light of day. If not *of* the world, she was *in* the world once more, and her spirits rose, as rise a charger's at the trumpet-blast, with the sights and sounds of a well-remembered battlefield. The soft rustle of skirts, the wave of white-gloved hands, the scent of patchouli, and heavy fragrance of hothouse flowers could not fail to recall a thousand joys, triumphs, impossible fancies and delights. It seemed as if she had

come back at last to living realities, from seclusion in the cloister or the grave.

Her husband had been dead so short a time, that she did not care to be recognised, and kept her face persistently directed towards the stage; but there never was woman yet who could not see clearly through the back of her head, and she knew as well as the boxkeeper five minutes after they entered the house, that Lord St. Moritz and Mrs. Stripwell were sitting two rows behind her, noting the while every detail of that lady's dress—how well it was put on, how little it covered her, and how much it must have cost.

Poor Algy, too, from a private box, was directing hungry looks through a pair of opera-glasses at the same object. To Prance, who sat next her, on one side, Mrs. Stripwell was but a flirting, worldly, commonplace woman, too much dressed—perhaps too much *un*dressed, wearing, he suspected, a touch of artificial black in her eyelashes and pink in her cheeks. To the boy who loved her she seemed a peri, an enchantress, a fairy queen, the one type and ideal of beauty almost divine, for which it would be unspeakable happiness to live, unequalled honour to die.

Perhaps in the whole of that crowded theatre, hers were the only eyes averted from the new melodrama at the rise of the curtain on its first scene, to discover a crescent moon (muslin transparency), and a gipsy encampment covering the stage.

It was received with enthusiastic approval, not undeserved by so artistic a grouping of figures in judicious obscurity, that brought out the white smoke of their kettles, and glowing embers of the gipsy fires. When the actors were ascertained to be *really* eating and drinking the excitement could not be repressed.

Presently they came forward, they listened, they conversed in gibberish (supposed to be Romany, but Beltenebrosa knew better), they moved about the stage, showing their costumes; the moon rose, one of the fires blazed up, and through a brightening background, peering from behind a massive pasteboard oak, advanced the manager's well-known figure, swarthy, black-browed, gorgeous in bright attire, not badly made-up to represent the conventional gipsy of an English stage. He was greeted with round after round of applause, and an admirer in the gallery prematurely vociferated "Encore!"

It was Mr. Delapré who bowed to the audience, the bold captain of a predatory band, who turned proudly to his followers and intimated the approach of travellers, strangers of distinction, whose carriage had broken down in the forest, reminding them that the traditions of their race insisted on the hospitable reception of these wayfarers, and immediate performance of the following ditty with its chorus:—

GIPSY JOHN.

The gipsy fires are shining,
The kettle sings a song,
And stomachs want their lining,
That are empty all day long.
Then welcome if you've lost your way
For daylight's past and gone,
And strangers might do worse than stay
To house with Gipsy John!

So dip your fingers in the stew,
And drink a cup to me;
I'll fill again, and drink to you
A health in Romany!

I hope you'll like your dinner—
But it's not polite to brag—
And as I'm a living sinner,
It has cost me not a mag!
That loaf is off the bailiff's board,
A rich cur-mud-ge-on!
The rest comes mostly from my lord,
Purloined by Gipsy John!

Then dip your fingers, etc.

There's fowl of many a feather,
There's a turkey-poult and hen,
A moorcock off the heather,
A mallard from the fen,
A leash of teal, a thumping goose,
As heavy as a swan;
He ought to wear his waistcoat loose
Who dines with Gipsy John!

Then dip your fingers, etc.

And when your brains are turning,
And you're only fit for bed,
Those lamps in heaven are burning
To light you overhead:
Till waking up, refreshed and bright,
When stars grow pale and wan,
You'll swear they pass a cosy night
Who lodge with Gipsy John!

Then dip your fingers, etc.

The birds of air shall call you,
  They are stirring with the day,
No mischief shall befall you
  Till we've set you on your way;
And when you've left the wanderers' camp
  To travel blithely on,
Be kind to some poor tinker-tramp,
  And think of Gipsy John!

Then dip your fingers, etc.

This characteristic ebullition afforded leisure for three travellers to appear from the side scenes, and stand about in uncomfortable attitudes while receiving their musical welcome, laying their heads together as if imparting confidences of a mysterious nature. What is it that actors and carriage-horses whisper to each other during a short respite from their respective duties?

Presently the new-comers, advancing to the footlights with backs turned, not very politely, to their picturesque host, commenced rather a tedious conversation in well-chosen phrases, from which it appeared that the taller was Hospodar, whatever that may mean, of a district called Podolia; that his friend was a Hungarian nobleman, a cousin, a confidant, or a secretary; and that the third was the Hospodar's valet, Fritz, in a hussar uniform, with a red nose and jocose tendencies, prone to impede the action of the piece.

Meanwhile, Lufra, a young gipsy beauty, easily recognised by the habitual playgoer as Miss Mountcharles, had stolen forward to listen, expressing with hands, shoulders, and eyebrows how strong an impression was made on her innocence by the appearance and manners of these visitors.

Their dress, indeed, seemed sufficiently startling. The Hospodar wore a long tunic, reaching to his knees, trimmed with fur, gold lace on his trousers, and, as a convenient appendage for a gentleman travelling through Europe in his own carriage, an enormous pair of brass heel-spurs. The secretary, whose proper title appeared to be Count Randolph, was clad in tights and hessian boots, with a white hat and closely buttoned brown frockcoat, on the breast of which glittered an enormous tinsel star. Fritz, whose military costume has already been mentioned, flapped about with a sabretache, but no sword!

Presently, as the action progresses, certain situations arise, of considerable dramatic power, and there is some

good acting, notably on the part of Miss Mountcharles, who shades off, with nice delicacy of touch, the imperceptible gradations by which a young girl's interest grows to sympathy, admiration, and love. The Hospodar, captivated from the first by Lufra's swarthy charms, advances, with marvellous rapidity, in her good graces (for the carriages are ordered at eleven), and obtains, in a few minutes, a confession of attachment, delivered frankly enough while she looks over his shoulder in Count Randolph's face. These are fine times for Mr. Delapré, who rants and rolls his eyes in paroxysms of very excusable jealousy, Lufra being the betrothed of Gipsy John, and, taking his cue from a great star in Othello, indulges himself with much posture-making, contortion, and gnashing of teeth, writhing, gesticulating, and, in the language provided by the talented author—

> Gnawing his heart, as wild dogs mouth a bone.

It is quite in accordance with reality that little privacy should be found in a gipsy camp, so they all overhear each other if anything of importance is to be communicated, thus helping on the piece, as, when deeds of violence are contemplated, everybody is at hand, and endless opportunities are afforded the comic servant of interposing to prevent bloodshed, with a facetious insolence that might be dangerous, if Hospodars were an irritable race.

However, there is some pleasant love-making by moonlight, and Miss Mountcharles—perhaps not inexperienced in this line—acquits herself with so much spirit as to draw down a handsome bouquet, thrown from a private box. It destroys the illusion, that the gipsy should leave her forest glades, come to the footlights, and curtsey, pressing the flowers to her heart. But what would you have? These compliments must be acknowledged; and though a shy young man, who discharged the missile, shrinks back and draws his curtain, Miss Mountcharles knows whence it comes, no doubt, and is grateful.

Recalled to a sense of her situation—as promised wife of a gipsy, and beloved of a Hospodar—she expresses contrition by word and action, but allows herself, none the less, to be inveigled into a carriage standing in the background; when Gipsy John rushing from the wings to oppose her elopement, a pistol is fired off by the Hospodar,

and a general row ensues, bringing down the drop-scene on a well-arranged *tableau* of flashing knives, brandished staves, and gesticulating gipsies, whose chief, but slightly wounded, points, with extended arm, to Lufra senseless in the midst, supported by Count Randolph and the Hospodar.

This drop-scene, too, is justly admired. It displays a tribe of gipsies on the march, apparently through the Pyrenees, with mules, donkeys, and a shaggy pony, the principal figures calling to mind certain well-known representations, by old masters, of the Flight into Egypt.

And now people begin to talk and stretch themselves The ladies make good use of their fans and converse with their admirers, while these yawn, stand up, and turn round to survey the house.

Lord St. Moritz, who has been unusually attentive to the business of the stage, finds time to look about him. Suddenly he starts, and scarcely represses an exclamation of surprise unnoticed by Mrs. Stripwell, who, vouchsafing a few civilities to Prance, is wondering in which of those private boxes "poor Algy" has ensconced himself, justly persuaded that he is sure to follow her here for the empty gratification of being under the same roof. His lordship has a quick eye and not a bad memory, nor is it possible to mistake the turn of that graceful head, those coils of gleaming black hair. All his old feelings come back with a rush, and he would make any sacrifice only to take Beltenebrosa by the hand once more. But he must bide his time. Mr. Delapré, a judicious caterer for the public allows no long intervals of waiting, and already a bell is ringing to announce the continuation of the piece.

CHAPTER XL

THE SECOND ACT

THE audience have been judiciously packed, the free list is represented in all parts of the house, and rounds of applause greet the reappearance of Mr. Delapré, dressed out in the height of fashion as a stage dandy of uncertain period. His wristbands are turned back over his coat-cuffs, his boots are resplendent with varnish, his frock-coat is buttoned, and he wears spurs, though ostensibly spending the evening with noblemen from every part of Europe in a Parisian resort furnished like a palace, which professes to be a high-class club devoted to high-class play.

Fruit, flowers, tall champagne-bottles, and pyramids of burnished plate, highly gilt, are piled upon a buffet at the back, while in front near the footlights is drawn a card-table, from which the players have lately risen, leaving great heaps of gold to mark the places where they sat.

Our friend the Hospodar seems to have been a heavy loser. He is accompanied by Count Randolph, and attended by Fritz, who carries a portfolio with an enormous lock and key. None of these have made the slightest alteration in their dress since we saw them last among the gipsies in the great forest. Their host's disguise, on the contrary, is so complete that they betray no suspicion of his identity, accepting him, as it would seem, for a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire, claiming no particular nationality, and addressing him, for no obvious reason, as "Excellency" at every second word.

Mr. Delapré is playing his very best. It is plain to see that he revels in his part. The high and mighty manners, the overdone courtesies, the bowing and bending and waving of arms are exceedingly to his taste, and he plumes himself on certain delicate by-play, in which he suffers the

habits of the vagrant to peep through the polish of the gentleman; as when, after quaffing a tall goblet of champagne, he wipes his mouth on his coat-sleeve; and again, lighting a cigar, holds the match in the hollow of his two hands, like one who is accustomed to smoke his pipe in the breezes of an open moor.

It is no sham cigar. Ladies in the farthest row of the stalls can smell it distinctly, and the audience are much gratified: they appreciate, no doubt, a realism which, improving on Horace's advice, thus appeals to a third sense for the truth of dramatic representation.

The Hospodar does not smoke. Perhaps his losses have affected his digestion; they seem to have been enormous, and have found their way into the pockets of the Prince. The loser clanks about the stage, nevertheless, with bombastic allusions to his serfs, his title-deeds, and his estates, quaffs champagne, turns his chair three times for luck, and sits down to play *écarté* with the winner for what he calls "the doubtful hazard of the whole amount," or, in plain English, double or quits.

Here the gipsy is in his element. Constant practice in fortune-telling has enabled him to do with the cards what he likes, and Mr. Delapré, shuffling the pack, lets his audience into the secret by performing two or three ingenious tricks. The Hospodar, in the meantime, summons Fritz with the portfolio, which seems to contain His Excellency's title-deeds, and prepares to join battle with all the resources at his command.

It is a thousand pities that our business and, for that matter, our pleasures, cannot be disposed of as expeditiously in real life as on the stage. An actor, with a slap on its page, reads a letter at one sidelong glance, and dashes off a cheque for a thousand in a quarter the time it takes you or me to write one for a hundred. He is no more dilatory at his toilet or his meals. Three turns of his cloak, and one pull at his hat, serve for complete disguise. He can drink to intoxication in a few seconds, and his dinner is finished almost as soon as he has sat down. It is no wonder, then, that in two of the quickest games ever played at cards, the Hospodar should have lost all his ready money and available resources; so that, in a hollow voice, betraying uncontrollable agitation, he challenges his antagonist to a third, unlocking the portfolio handed him by Fritz, and placing on the table, as his stakes, a small

document tied up in red tape, purporting to be the title-deeds of his Podolian estates.

Count Randolph and Fritz are looking on. The company, leaving their own games unfinished, have gathered round. Mr. Delapré, cutting the pack, performs deftly enough, yet so distinctly that it is patent to his audience, the old trick of palming the king, and marks him with a diabolical scowl, that changes through a sneer to a smile, as he meets his adversary's eye.

The Hospodar shades his brow with his hand. When he withdraws it, his face is deadly pale. He trembles so that he can hardly deal the cards, and presently, uttering an exclamation of despair, rises, advances to the footlights, and proclaims to prompter, fiddlers, and occupiers of the stalls, that he is a ruined man!

It seems, however, that the amusements are to conclude with a ball, given by the club; for at this juncture the card-tables are cleared away, the back of the stage discloses a brilliant chandelier and crowded dancing-room; couples advance to the front, officers in red, diplomatists in blue, ladies rouged, jewelled, and in the shortest petticoats. Lufra, now Her Excellency, the admired of all, whirls away for a waltz in Count Randolph's arms. The Hospodar stands immovable, staring into vacancy; Mr. Delapré, posing for Mephistopheles, contemplates his victim; the drop-scene falls, and Beltenebrosa, taking courage to steal a look round, finds Lord St. Moritz has vanished, and his place is occupied by a young man she never saw before.

Now, during the conclusion of the foregoing act, there had been as much by-play on one side of the footlights as on the other. Lord St. Moritz was resolved to have a word with Beltenebrosa when she left the theatre, but did not see his way to an interview so long as he was in charge of Mrs. Stripwell, whom he could not leave unattended in such a place as this. Catching sight of "poor Algy" in the back of a private box, and stimulated perhaps by the genius of the locality, a plan of escape occurred to him which he lost no time in carrying out. The evening was mild, the house crowded; Mrs. Stripwell fanned herself without cessation, for, although in winter, the temperature was unpleasantly high.

"You feel it, I see," he whispered in his companion's pretty little ear, which had turned a deeper pink than usual. "Don't it make you quite faint?"

"Faint!" she repeated in the same tone, with some scorn; "not a bit. Why should it? What makes you ask?"

"Simply because I feel so myself, Mrs. Stripwell; don't consider me a brute if I desert you for ten minutes to get a breath of fresh air. Think what a false position I should be in if I fainted dead away anywhere but at your feet!"

"There wouldn't be much room," she answered, laughing. "And I won't have you on my knee. Yes, you'd better go, and come back when you feel better."

So he snatched up his hat and overcoat, to sidle out with many apologies over the feet and dresses of some half-score acquaintances.

Once clear, he lost no time in finding the box occupied by "poor Algy," and tapping at the door, which was opened by that Guardsman himself, called him into the passage.

"Algy," said he, "you can do me a great favour, and I think it will be no trouble to you: taking care of the ladies is all in your line."

"What is it?" asked Algy, not very cordially disposed towards his visitor, but mollified—as who would not be at twenty?—by the inference his compliment conveyed.

"Well, I'm obliged to leave the theatre, you see, and Mrs. Stripwell has no one to look after her. Would you mind taking my place, and getting her carriage, and all that? Will it bore you?"

Bore him! Did it bore William of Deloraine to look on daylight once more when he had lingered "long months three in dungeon dark" of the feudal enemy he yearned to see restored to life that he might have the pleasure of killing him on his own account? Does it bore the camels of the desert, the oxen of the Transvaal, to see and smell the water-pool for which their very hearts are athirst? Does it bore the Swiss to revisit his mountains, the miser to reclaim his gold, the bee to revel in the petals of the rose? Algy seemed so much bored with his lordship's request, he could hardly gasp out a delighted assent.

"The stall is number eleven," said the latter, buttoning up his coat: "this side of the house; you will have no difficulty in finding it. Tell her I'm very much afraid I shall not be able to come back."

I wonder what he did tell her when he sank into the seat by her side with a feeling of actual physical relief,

after the tortures of pique, vexation, and jealousy undergone in the private box from which he had been watching the graceful head and white shoulders that could never be his own—that, his better reason often told him, wouldn't if they could. What folly, what madness it all was! And yet to this day he can look back on the short, sweet, sinful dream, as his one glimpse into Fairyland. Yes, when our eyes are touched with the enchanted herb, this bewildering region looks like the true Paradise; but few of us have Thomas the Rhymer's luck to escape before that fatal term arrives which renders us amenable to the tax from hell.

All he did say, depend upon it, was not a quarter of what was in his head, a tithe of what was in his heart. She would have liked him better, perhaps, had he been more voluble and less sincere.

He was young, and could therefore plead more excuse for his folly than Lord St. Moritz. The one drowned heart, brain, and senses in a deep full draught of intoxication; the other, like an habitual dram-drinker, kept up his excitement with frequent sips, always willing to partake, wherever offered, of the stimulating glass.

It has been observed by more than one author that the devil is never so busy with a man as while he is waiting for a woman.

It must have been a pertinacious little imp who was whispering in his lordship's ear, as he turned up the collar of his coat and lit a cigar to hang about the deserted street at the door of the play-house. He felt he had made sure of Beltenebrosa by his speedy exit. Whether she left early or late, he could not miss her now, and the very fact of her being in London argued a loneliness that must prove favourable to his advances. How noble she looked while she turned her profile to examine the house! Mourning only added to the brilliancy of her eyes and smile. She was pale, indeed, but no paler than usual; perhaps a trifle fuller in figure than when he saw her last at Combe-Wester, and, if possible, more beautiful. She had not been pining for *him*, that seemed clear enough, and he liked her all the better. Where would he ever see such a woman again? What was Lady Goneril—what were a hundred Mrs. Stripwells compared to this paragon? Why not marry her now she was free, and become a respectable member of society once more?

If the little imp had only whispered, "Perhaps she wouldn't marry *you*," his lordship might have thought of the matter seriously; but it did nothing of the kind: on the contrary, it reminded him of his many conquests, of his general popularity, of his experiences with the unfortunate lady now in her grave whom he had once led to the altar; and again came over him the insuperable aversion to domestic restraint that had become ingrained in his very being.

"There is no occasion for the sacrifice," he said to himself, wondering how long this third act would last, and what excuse he should make to Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa, for intruding himself so far as to ask for a lift in her carriage home. Of course she had a carriage; if a hired brougham, so much the better: its driver would be devoid of curiosity on any subject unconnected with beer. Of interruption from Mrs. Stripwell he had no fear. That lady could keep a dozen admirers on hand with perfect equanimity, but the one who was present always had the call, and he felt persuaded she would have eyes and ears only for the blissful Algy, if she came out of the house on his arm, and permitted him to wind a provoking little cloud of woollen work she affected round her dainty chin.

"How he dotes on her, poor boy!" thought Lord St. Moritz, turning in his walk at the nearest lamp-post, with a cynical smile. "He loves the very ground she treads, and thinks she can do no wrong. What a fool he is! and, by Jove, what a fool I am too! I'll be hanged if it isn't beginning to rain!"

CHAPTER XLI

"THE ROMANY'S REVENGE"

IT seems a pity to lose the last act, culminating in a catastrophe by no means original, but sufficiently far-fetched to delight a public that, naturally enough, requires on the stage improbabilities more striking than it meets with at home.

Beltenebrosa, thoroughly interested in the action of the piece, suffers not a word nor look of the principal performer to escape her, following Mr. Delapré with her eyes in such earnest attention as would be exceedingly flattering to that gentleman were he not so absorbed in his own part that he can think of nothing else. His place, too, is at the back of the scene, which now represents a terrace opening from the ballroom, studded with huge stone vases full of flowers, overlooking gardens like those of Versailles—silvered with sparkling fountains, gemmed in coloured lamps, and bordered by a dim, well-wooded landscape, that stretches to the horizon under a pale glimmer of dawn. In front, while striding to and fro as contemplating some desperate measure, the Hospodar imparts to that eligible confidant, Hussar Fritz, his irremediable ruin, and the fatal resolution it compels him to adopt.

"The barque," says he, launching on the strain of metaphor in which a man ordinarily addresses his valet, "reft of its helm, drives hopeless to the rock! Stripped of her plumes, the eagle falls to earth!"

Fritz stares—as well he may—while Mr. Delapré, cloaked to the chin, and not the least concealed by the stone vases behind which he prowls, mutters "Hist!" very loud and with such emphasis as calls attention to a coming declaration from the Hospodar that he means to blow his own brains out before sunrise. Fritz, much affected, but preserving the comic side of his character, endeavours to dissuade his master from so irrevocable a step, reminding

him of Lufra, when the Hospodar embarks in a high-flown and tedious harangue, enlarging on the many estimable qualities of that young person, and his regret, which seems in no way to affect his determination, that they must soon be parted for ever; concluding that he will "retire to yonder chamber for an hour, to pen the last directions and farewell. This friendly weapon, loaded to my hand, acquittance shall afford with full release. And harkye! even as to-morrow's sun comes up, my Fritz, the Hospodar goes down!"

So this doomed noble "retires up," and the Prince comes forward from behind his flower-vases to dash a tear-drop from his eye, and smite his breast hard with clenched fist, as denoting intentions of immediate action, to be explained in a soliloquy, that is happily interrupted by the appearance of Lufra in her ball-dress, kissing her fingers to a partner she has left at the wings, obviously on her way to husband, cloakroom, carriage, and bed.

Startled by the presence of His Excellency, whom she does not in the least recognise for her gipsy lover, she nevertheless gives him her hand with touching confidence. Mr. Delapré having the stage to himself, plays up to the situation with unbounded satisfaction. Pique, scorn, jealousy, and, to use the powerful language of the dramatist,

> The ashes of an unextinguished fire,
> That burned so fiercely once in this fond heart,
> Whose tablets bear the brand of Lufra's name
> Scored to the quick in characters of flame!

—all this has to be represented, besides a sentiment of generosity that struggles hard with less worthy considerations, and gains the ascendency at last.

"Charles Kean could have done it," thinks Mr. Delapré, "and perhaps Macready; nobody else that ever walked the boards, I firmly believe, but your humble servant!"

His Excellency, assuming the part of Mario as Don Giovanni in the supper scene, a delineation of the polished *roué* that can never be surpassed, congratulates the lady on her looks, her dress, her dancing, and her good spirits. She is happy no doubt, as she deserves to be, with her husband; and he—what an enviable lot seems his! How true the proverb that love makes amends to those who have bad luck at cards! Bad luck! She suspected, nay, she feared it. His Excellency must not detain her; she

ought to be at her husband's side in his distress. He loves her, do you see? and nobody else can console him.

His Excellency would not detain her on any consideration, but he does not let go of her hand, catechising her with a persistency for which he deserved to have his ears boxed. Does she love the Hospodar honestly, from the bottom of her heart? Has she no thoughts but for him? Does she never spare one single sigh for another?

Lufra covers her face with her hands—the best actress cannot blush through a quarter of an hour without an inch of paint—and confesses by her disorder that it is possible there might be a somebody else, only the Hospodar is so kind, so indulgent, so fond of her. No, she would be miserable away from him. She must go to him now! Gipsy John is touched, believing himself not wholly forgotten.

And if the Hospodar were in trouble, argues His Excellency, pursuing the unwelcome subject, if he were in difficulties, if he were r-r-ruined! and by his own folly, what then? Would she not leave him to his fate, and take refuge with that other for whom she yet cherishes some kindly remembrance in her heart? How can he ask? His Excellency might find more worthy themes for jesting than a woman's holiest feelings, or is this done to try her? Were the Hospodar ruined, nay, were he even disgraced, she would fly to him the faster, bringing help if she could, love, sympathy, and comfort, if help were beyond her power.

A husband never needed more the presence of his wife, continues His Excellency, observing that he scorns to jest or trifle; his heart is too heavy; and only in deep and desperate play can it find distraction from undying regret. At such a pastime fortune favoured him to-night. He has won from the Hospodar everything that nobleman possessed in the world, except (with a satanic grin) his wife. If she believes him not, he can furnish proof. There!—he flings at her feet the document before mentioned, tied up in its red tape. Here are the title-deeds conveying possession of castles, forests, serfs—in short, a whole principality within the frontiers of Podolia. Hold! for she pounces at it like a kitten at a ball. That little packet is worth a king's ransom; shall it not purchase a woman's smile? Ah! will she not think kindly of one who can thus sacrifice the revenues of a kingdom for her sake?

Here Mr. Delapré, taking another leaf out of Mario's book, as Faust in the garden, does some strenuous love-making—so impassioned, indeed, that Mrs. Stripwell in the stalls feels less displeasure at the signs Lufra begins to show of relenting than surprise she should have held out so long. If Algy could only act like this, or any of them, what a much pleasanter world we should have! How delightful to be assailed in blank verse, with long-resounding periods and dramatic gestures to correspond! Why, oh, why could her own admirers never soar beyond "tremendously fetching" and "awfully nice"?

There are some things, not many, that a man does better in sport than in earnest. The less respect he entertains for his listeners, the better he succeeds when making speeches or making love. In such rhetorical flights a familiarity, born of constant practice, alone ensures success. Maiden efforts are usually clumsy productions enough, and the House of Commons, I have been given to understand, is exceedingly tolerant of awkwardness in a first essay; but the more practical sex are by no means so indulgent in taking the will for the deed; and a suitor is likely enough to find himself non-suited who boggles, stammers, and cannot get out what he means.

Mr. Delapré, either on or off the stage, is a glib wooer enough, and seems to advance rapidly in the good graces of Lufra, perhaps reminding her of someone who has made love to her before; but time and the prompter wait for no man: a sudden brightening of the whole stage with a tinge of crimson thrown from the sides, that again to quote the dramatist,

> Flushes with rosy light the eastern sky,

—serves to warn His Excellency that the sun is rising, and no time must be lost if the Hospodar is to be prevented going down by his own hand.

Lufra is in possession of the title-deeds. She has kissed and placed them in her bosom with many professions of gratitude in dumb show. Taking her by the tips of her fingers, as if to lead her out in a minuet, the Prince conducts her to the back of the stage, both walking, for no obvious reason, with extreme caution, on their toes.

Count Randolph, still in his frockcoat and hessians, appears for a moment at the side scenes, expressing by his

gestures extreme solicitude for Her Excellency, whom he seems to have been watching since she left the ball room. Making signs of caution not to be noticed by the Prince, Lufra points to her bosom, as if to assure the Count she has got something safe in that enviable lurking-place; and he retires, also on tiptoe, apparently well satisfied. The orchestra now plays a few bars in a low key, suggestive of mystery, and indeed apprehension, from *The Lohengrin*, while the whole stage becomes obscured, which would be surprising at sunrise did one not remember that the darkest hour of night comes immediately before day. As the music dies out in low, faint, trembling chords, double doors open at the back of the stage, to discover, in a room furnished for a bedchamber, the Hospodar leaning pensively against a window-frame, to watch the widening dawn. Fritz is at hand with a case of duelling pistols, standing in an attitude of respectful and soldierlike attention, prepared to obey orders without demur.

The Hospodar, murmuring farewell to Podolia, and maundering about "his hordes of horsemen" left without a chief, takes one of the weapons from its case, to load it with the utmost nicety, glancing the while at that ever-brightening horizon in which the crimson has now turned to gold. As the rim of an exceedingly red sun peeps above the sky-line, he cocks his pistol, and presses it to his forehead. One moment, and Podolia would lose her lord; but his arm is caught and held down by Lufra, who hangs about his neck, assuring him, with tears and sobs and wild caresses, that, thanks to their preserver — to wit, His Excellency—they are saved!

The Prince looks sternly on, and Count Randolph, who has followed the others, tries to stand aside in an easy attitude, feeling, no doubt, that his presence here is uncalled for and superfluous.

Charged to explain, Lufra, followed by the whole party, advances to the footlights, and with a redundancy of action that displays her well-turned bust and powdered arms to great advantage, draws from her bosom the important title-deeds, to present them in conjugal affection to her husband. With these flies out an envelope that falls at the Hospodar's feet, who, naturally enough, picks it up, and is about to return it politely, when his attention is arrested by the start and half-suppressed shriek of the owner, who flings her hands above her head

in a gesture of despair. Count Randolph, too, seems disturbed, advancing with the established half-stride, full stop, and regulation glare.

The Hospodar, pistol in hand, looks from one to the other, tears open the paper, and finds what he is pleased to term "the blasting sight" of the Count's photograph, with certain impassioned lines that leave no doubt of his wife's infidelity. He raises his arm and covers his enemy with deadly aim; Lufra throws herself at his feet in wild despair; His Excellency, emerging from his cloak, stands revealed as Gipsy John, contemplating the group with scowls of fiendish scorn, and the curtain falls; while Mrs. Stripwell, collecting her wraps, hastens into the passage, not waiting to see Mr. Delapré lead Miss Mountcharles across a narrow strip of stage at the footlights, with many sidelong bows and obeisances to acknowledge the ovation in which the audience bid them good-night.

"What do you think of it?" she asks Algy, on whose arm she leans, rather heavily, he flatters himself.

Algy never enjoyed a play so much: he would like to bring her here every night. Why can't he say so, instead of blundering out irrelevant remarks concerning Miss Mountcharles, her rouge, her figure, and personal advantages, on or off the stage?

Beltenebrosa has nobody to take care of *her*. How different from last season, she thinks rather bitterly, and not without a twinge of regret for the dead husband who had enough generosity to be proud of the admiration accorded to his wife.

She misses him more than usual to-night, and cannot help thinking how conveniently those sturdy shoulders of his would have forced a passage for her through the crowd streaming to the door. She fell back to let them pass, and was one of the last to leave the theatre. When she came out it was raining hard, and not a cab to be seen.

CHAPTER XLII

OUT OF QUOD

LORD ST. MORITZ stood at her elbow.

"Good heavens, signora!" he exclaimed, using the old familiar expression, "what an unexpected meeting! How delightful to see you once more! But you can't stand talking here; you'll be wet to the skin. Where is your carriage? Take my arm, and let me get you a cab."

Mechanically she obeyed. There were some rough people about, and a drunken woman was screaming horrible oaths. Lord St. Moritz seemed no unwelcome escort, and —yes, after her long seclusion, it was refreshing to meet an admirer again.

At the first lamp-post they hailed a passing cab, the driver of which, an old man, was wrapped in coat and comforter to the eyes. Before she had time to think what she was doing, Lord St. Moritz asked her address, handed her in, gave the cabman directions, took his place by her side, and shut the door with a bang. The next moment they were jolting along a badly lighted, badly paved street, and he was shaking hands with her, quite unnecessarily, a second time.

I imagine no vehicle in the world is so ill adapted for confidential disclosures, or even general conversation, as a four-wheeled cab. It is confined, uncomfortable, and noisy. If the windows are down, mud splashes in from every puddle; if you pull them up, they jingle so that you cannot hear yourself speak. The cushions are too often dirty and damp, the seats sloping and narrow; the whole interior redolent of stale tobacco-smoke, mould, and manure. Perhaps, all these disagreeables combined causing Beltenebrosa to desire the conclusion of her drive, led her to notice the streets through which they passed, and to suspect they were taking a roundabout way home.

Like her kinsfolk, she was gifted with an instinctive

Went down as if he had been shot

knowledge of locality, and having seen a place once, would always recognise it again by day or night. She was quite sure she had passed none of these lanes and byways on her way to the Nonsuch Theatre from South Kensington. Some idea of the insult he was trying to put on her roused her temper to the utmost. She desired, in a loud and angry tone, to be set down at once. The words had hardly passed her lips when the cab came to a sudden stop; a heavy figure descended hurriedly from the box; the door swung open; a powerful hand was laid on Lord St. Moritz's collar, and a hoarse voice exclaimed in the familiar accents of Fighting Jack, barely six weeks out of prison—

"Blowed if I worn't sure of it! Blessed if it ain't my lass!—my lass that I never thought to set eyes on to again. Don't you be skeered, my pretty. This here swell must be a better man than I take him for if he offers to lay a hand on ye while your old father can stand up to see fair."

Thus speaking, he pulled Lord St. Moritz out of the vehicle by main force, with a jerk that sent him reeling some paces along the footway. His lordship's blood was up, and without a moment's reflection he advanced on the cabman with his fists clenched, in an attitude that showed he was not unpractised in the art of self-defence. The old professional laughed with a grim satisfaction almost amounting to good-humour. After his long imprisonment it was *delicious*—nothing else—to open his shoulders and feel the play of his salient muscles once again. He stopped the other's blows coolly, and only sparred at first, as if for the mere pleasure of the thing, till his fighting instinct grew too strong, and, drawing himself together, he sent in one of his terrible left-handers—foot, body, arm, and shoulder lending their whole force to a blow before which Lord St. Moritz went down as if he had been shot.

"The cove worn't much of a glutton," said the old gipsy, relating the circumstances subsequently, with a calm, reflective smile. "A' knowed when he'd got enough. But there! to see him come in on purpose, like, with his guard anywheres and his mouth open!—flesh and blood couldn't abide the temptation, and I *let him have it!*"

At the moment, however, it seemed just possible his lordship, who lay perfectly senseless, might never get up again, and a policeman's heavy tread echoing through

the neighbouring street, Fighting Jack sprang hastily to the box, put his horse into the best apology for a gallop the poor old broken-down jade could afford, and only stopped for further directions when he had come a good mile from the scene of combat.

That unscrupulous gentleman, whom the passing policeman, with a strong notion that he was in liquor, now occupied himself in restoring to consciousness, had omitted to give the cabman Mrs. Paravant's proper address. It was late at night, or rather early in the morning, when Fighting Jack set his daughter down at her own door, refusing, with more delicacy of feeling than might have been expected, a hospitable entreaty that he would come upstairs to refresh himself after his late encounter.

"Not at present, I thank ye, my lass," said Jack, with affectionate politeness; and I'll not take no fare, neither, not from *you*, my pretty! Dry? In course I'm dry—I'm allus dry. That's wot's the matter o' me. But I knows the rights—wot I calls the bearings—of things, as well as here and there one. Father or no father, daughter or no daughter, I ain't fit company for a lady's drawing-room, not till I've a-been home and cleaned myself, and seen to the horse, and taken my forty winks, maybe, and a whiff of a pipe. That's neither here nor there, but to-morrow's a new day."

Looking at her progenitor as he went his way, Beltenebrosa could not but observe how the weighty arm of the law had bent his powerful frame, and how a few months of penal servitude had added years to his age.

His shaggy brows, once black as jet, were now grizzled, and the dark eyes that used to flash so brightly beneath them had become blear and dim. He stooped, too, and though his frame was large and muscular still, he seemed no longer a tower of strength, but rather a fine old ruin mouldering to decay. Like many another athlete, Jack had taken liberties with his constitution, and feeling little inconvenience from their effects, had indulged in ardent spirits with the freedom that too surely entails its own punishment. Cold, fever, privation, excessive watching, unreasonably hard work—these are inimical to longevity, but not one of them, nor all put together, can kill a man so surely as gin! It cuts his throat as effectually as a knife, only not from the outside. When Beltenebrosa

last saw him on Swansdown Racecourse, more than a year ago, Fighting Jack, to use his own expression, was "in the hands of the Philistines."

These did not get possession of his person without having to pay pretty dear for their prize. Up or down, rough-and-tumble, boxing, wrestling, or contending with his fellow-man in any other way, the old gipsy was a thorough proficient, for attack or defence. One policeman got his nose broken, another gave his evidence before the magistrates with a fearful pair of black eyes, and a third, brought into court in an arm-chair, swore with much circumstantial detail, in which there was not a particle of truth, that the prisoner had bitten his finger and stamped on him when he was down.

"I'd scorn to do it!" said Jack in unaffected indignation. "No, your worships, I've taken and given punishment as free as most, but I never hit a man a foul blow in my life, and I never will."

As this was the only defence he chose to offer, he found himself committed for trial on more than one serious charge; and although his people made up a good purse of money to retain a counsel who knew every outlet of the law, and witnesses prepared to perjure themselves to any extent, it was no use. A sufficiently lenient judge did but his duty when he sentenced Fighting Jack to a long spell of imprisonment with hard labour in the county gaol.

For this child of the wilderness such confinement was double the punishment it would have been for the inhabitant of a town. The tough old vagrant pined like a love-sick girl for the song of the birds, the flutter of leaves, the glint of the morning sun on a running stream. Till he was deprived of them, he never knew that these were as necessary to his existence as the food he ate, the air he breathed. Had his seclusion in that bare, clean, white-washed cell lasted but a few weeks longer, he believed it would have killed him; and old Jack, forced to spend in meditation the leisure he used to beguile with beer and tobacco, wondered what would have become of him then. Was the parson in downright earnest when he told those surprising yarns concerning the two future states? or only earning his day's pay, and jawing against time—"sparring for wind" the old boxer called it—because it seemed his duty to have something to say? Altogether, he was disposed to believe that his dissolution would, by some

inexplicable process of transmutation, identify him with the world of nature and the elements he loved, to be about in the morning mists that rolled along the moor, the evening breeze that stirred the leafy brake, hovering in company with his beautiful Shuri, the wife he had not forgotten in twenty years, over the haunts they knew so well and loved so dearly long long ago.

He was no atheist: few men are. He entertained some vague notions of a mighty Governing Power, a Supreme Being to whom he felt grateful for health, strength, warmth, and sunshine, but whom he believed profoundly indifferent to the doings of mankind, or if concerning Himself on occasion with so inferior an order, according to gipsies a liberty of action not enjoyed by the rest of the human race.

Jack drew an extremely wide margin for his system of ethics, but would by no means pass his own line of demarcation between right and wrong. Perhaps when he sold his famous fight in the pride of his pugilistic fame, he felt more like doing evil than on any other occasion. He told himself many a time, and did not forget to repeat the reflection in prison, that "things had never gone right with him since, all round!"

When he left the gaol, with empty pockets and an enfeebled frame,—for in spite of wholesome diet and enforced temperance, the fretting had worn him down,—he scarcely knew where to turn for a livelihood. Society is not disposed to employ a gipsy at best, but on a gipsy fresh out of prison the most liberal will inevitably turn a cold shoulder. The *status ante* is always a difficult position to resume; for none more so than the culprit who has been condemned by the laws of society, though he may have worked out his sentence in full. We sin against God, and find pardon without punishment over and over again; we sin against man, are beaten with many stripes, and seem never to be freely forgiven after all.

Though the old gipsy could turn his hand to most things, he had no implements for the prosecution of his former occupations, and a certain dogged sense of honesty, somewhat rare in his race, forbade the obvious resource of stealing to obtain daily bread. A man cannot make a basket without withies, nor mend a kettle without tools; and but for the timely help of a Prisoners' Aid Society, Fighting Jack must have starved. He received

the welcome gratuity with an astonishment that drowned every other sentiment, even gratitude.

"Then there *is* chaps in the world," said he, "and high chaps too, as will pick a man up when he's down! Well, I *am*—a"—

He might have expressed himself in less reprehensible language; but from that day forth the gipsy thought better of his neighbour, especially his neighbour in purple and fine linen, who fared sumptuously every day.

His self-respect made the old man averse to seeking out his tribe, who were, besides, at the other end of the kingdom, and applying to them for the assistance that, according to their patriarchal notions, he could claim as a right. He had always been comparatively well-to-do amongst these followers, who called him their patron, and it seemed a humiliation to ask where he was accustomed to give. Yet he longed wearily to be with them again: yearned for the ragged tents, smouldering fires, and steaming kettles, no less cruelly than did Kingsley's dying chief for the wild and spacious plains of his Tartar home, while he moaned his last wish—

> I would I were back in Cauca-land,
> To hear my herdsmen's horn,
> And to watch the waggons and brown brood mares,
> And the tents where I was born.

After knocking about the mews and stableyards of London, Fighting Jack, whose knowledge of horseflesh was not to be despised, succeeded at last in obtaining employment as the driver of a four-wheeled cab, and found the situation, which involved much consumption of spirits in the open air, tolerably to his taste.

He was down on his luck, though, the wet night Lord St. Moritz hailed him, and had not taken five shillings since breakfast. Wrapped in his shabby old boxcoat, he was driving doggedly on, concerning himself in no way with the destination of his fare, lost in a train of thought that carried him with his Shuri far into the past, when in a moment, through the roll and jingle of his vehicle, her unforgotten voice, raised in accents of alarm and danger, thrilled to his very heart. In one second he woke from his dream, the next he recognised his daughter, and having lost little of his promptitude for action, a third scarcely elapsed ere he had leapt down to her rescue, and gone in with fatal effect at the offending nobleman, who ought to have known better than to be there at all.

CHAPTER XLIII

POOR RELATIONS

"NO! my dear; but thank ye kindly, just the same; there ain't no call for the like of me to bide along of the like of ye. Not that I could bear to part with ye—never think it! But there! I don't seem to get my health, not sleeping night after night under the same roof, and my meals doesn't do me no good, not if I'm fed regular like a swine! Now, I shouldn't wonder if you had silver forks every day!"

Beltenebrosa could not honestly deny it, and felt perhaps less disappointed than she chose to appear at the disinclination to share his daughter's home which her vagabond parent evinced.

Looking at him by daylight, though he had "cleaned himself" as he threatened, there certainly seemed a want of finish in his appearance that was less striking outside a cab than inside a drawing-room. His clothes were shabby, indeed squalid, but that could be rectified; soap and water, too, applied more freely, would have done much for the improvement of face and hands. Such details were of little importance; the real curse that had come upon the man was obvious at a glance: his whole person wore the sodden look of one whose chief nutriment is gin. It needed no experience in such matters to convince her that the old gipsy had become a confirmed drunkard, and it was to her credit that Beltenebrosa should have felt a kindly and filial impulse to cure him if she could.

When he called to see her the morning after their adventure, she frankly invited him to come and live with her, moved partly by feelings of gratitude and affection, partly by a sense of loneliness forcibly brought home to her in the events of the previous night. She could provide for him, she said; she had enough for two. Living

under her roof he would be sheltered from exposure to the elements, and—and—would not require quantities of alcohol to withstand their effects.

Perhaps he saw her drift, for there is no vice so sensitive to discovery or so averse to counsel as habitual drunkenness ; perhaps a knowledge of the world he had not quite forgotten warned him such companionship must prove distasteful to both, or, more probably still, he felt under surveillance in the presence of this superior being, though she *was* his daughter, and longed, especially since his imprisonment, for unrestricted liberty of speech and action. So they made an agreement, like most compromises, to the satisfaction of neither, that Jack should take lodgings in the vicinity, which he immediately did at the nearest public-house, should have access to the society of his daughter at stated hours, and that, although no consideration would induce him to pollute with tobacco such splendid apartments, yet, as of course there was usually "wine on the table," he could sit with her in the afternoons while she cleaned up, did her bit of needlework or what not, to partake of a cheerful glass.

Then the gipsy, receiving a trifle of wages due, discharged himself from his employer, and disappeared for eight-and-forty hours, where or how Beltenebrosa forebore to inquire, not caring to learn that he spent the whole interval between the floor and table of a taproom, dead drunk. Who has not pitied Sindbad the Sailor for his Old Man of the Sea? For many days Beltenebrosa bore her incubus with exemplary patience and resignation. She let him sit by her side hour after hour through the short winter afternoons, so soon dark even in South Kensington, and the long candlelight evenings that dragged so wearily till he went away to what he called his "bit of supper," listening to his maunderings over the wine he insisted on sipping in honour of the position, though he would have much preferred gin. She even nursed him through a sharp fit of "the horrors," tending him with courage and forbearance, notwithstanding that her nerves were sadly shaken by the old gipsy's powers of imagination and description when he fancied himself in another world. She hoped this would have cured him ; but, no: though he trembled and cried like a child, with humble promises of amendment in his utter prostration, no sooner did strength

return than he resumed his former habits, and took to drinking worse than ever.

Nor was this all. In some of the various haunts he frequented he came across his kinsman Jericho: no longer the Jericho of former days — blithe, free-hearted, and, except in the matter of game and poultry, comparatively honest; but Jericho a confirmed knave and ruffian, who had graduated through the sciences of chain-dropping, shop-lifting, and picking pockets, into an accomplished criminal, ready for any scheme of plunder however iniquitous, and living in ease, almost affluence, on the proceeds of his villainy.

Old Jack's arrest had indeed served to break up the gang: deprived of their leader, they were like sheep without a bell-wether for courage, like pirates without a captain for ferocity. The community became totally disorganised, and it was a mercy—to use Jericho's pious expression—that they did not turn to and rob one another! Perhaps they only escaped this last degradation because there was so little to take. Tent after tent, family after family, seceded from the encampment, drifting on their several courses to all parts of the kingdom. Some wandered into Yorkshire, some crossed the Border to Kirk-Yetholm in Scotland; a few, amongst them Jericho, cast up at Norwood, Shepherd's Bush, and other haunts near London. Nance married a tinker. This they felt a great blow and deep disgrace, for the favoured suitor could boast only the slightest cross of gipsy blood in his veins. He had certain merits, no doubt, being a returned convict and expert thief; but it was a deplorable alliance, in Jericho's opinion, and but for the patron's absence would never have taken place.

"Wot, they missed the old man, did 'em?" said Jack, when his former follower detailed these particulars of a lost empire. "Ah, them was good times with us all, when I used to hang out in the old caravan, and never a Romany of our own lot knew wot it was to want a drain, come when he would, morning, noon, or night. But it's not such a bad berth, Jerry, as I've chanced to run against here, though I *do* miss the roll of the old wheels; and if it wasn't for drink, a man would go mad to open his eyes on the same outlook every morning of his life!"

Then Jack explained how and where he had again

chanced on his daughter, launching into so flowery a description of her wealth and the luxury in which she lived, as roused all the cupidity of Jericho's nature, and determined him to resume the working of a fertile field that had lain fallow much too long.

After Paravant's fatal accident, he would doubtless have followed up the widow, for Jericho allowed no sentimental considerations to interfere with that unscrupulous annexation of property which he considered the real business of life, but for one serious difficulty—a case of passing base coin, in the county of Middlesex, which necessitated seclusion for an allotted period, and an avoidance for some time to come of the district in which he had made himself too conspicuous.

London also is a very large place, where people miss each other quite as unaccountably as they meet, and Jericho was deeply concerned to think that Jane Lee, relict of the rich Mr. Paravant, had slipped through his fingers once for all, so the minute intelligence received from his old patron was welcome as unexpected.

The two men were drinking in a dingy parlour, at the back of one of those public-houses it is so difficult to find by daylight, within call of Leicester Square. It was eleven o'clock a.m., and they were testing the merits of gin and water as compared with gin and cloves, the patron, it is unnecessary to observe, preferring the stronger compound. Jericho, dressed in a style he designated "bang-up," which caused him to look like a broken-down billiard-marker, insisted on standing treat, and the patron, holding a pewter measure lately refilled, was enjoying that placid state of imbecility in which most of his hours were passed.

"She's a good gal," said he, "and a handsome, beautiful, and dutiful, free with her money, too, like a real lady; but I could wish as she'd bring herself to trust the old father a bit. She's close, Jerry, that's what she is. It's hard to think sometimes as she's my own child."

"There's her marks," observed the other.

"There's her marks," repeated Jack, smacking his lips over the gin and cloves. "If it weren't for her marks I'd swear on a book as she'd been born a queen. Only to see her walk, Jerry. Blessed if I know whether she does walk: it's more like the sailing of a ship. And to think that's my Shuri's babby, as kep' me awake crying, night after night,

on Leatherhead Common, under the stars. When I've got to die, Jerry, please God I'll do it out o' doors."

His eye wandered, his tongue seemed growing large in his mouth; the dreams of his youth, and the cloves, and perhaps the gin, were too much for him.

"I remember as if it was yesterday," he continued, shaking his head, "old Aunt Ryley she came to supper in our tent, with a needle, and a handful of gunpowder as she borrowed off of poaching Jim Lovel. 'Name this child,' says she. 'Shuri,' says I, 'for the little one is as like her mother as a cygnet to a swan.' 'Not a bit of it,' says my Shuri. 'We mustn't call it John,' says she, 'because it's a lass; but we'll call it Jane,' says she. 'Prick it in, Aunt Ryley,' says she: 'J for Jane and L for Lee. That's as near as we can get.' How it squeaked, poor little beggar! And now they're all gone. Where, Jerry? That's it. I wish as I knowed. Aunt Ryley, and my Shuri, and plenty more, while little Jane Lee growed into a real lady, gloves, and a gold watch, and money in both pockets, and a silk gownd on her back, and a slate roof over her head. What's the meaning of it all, Jerry? And how is it worked? That beats me!"

But Jerry, who was not drunk enough to embark on such visionary speculations, felt more interest in the present prosperity of Mrs. Paravant, and the advantages he could derive therefrom, than in the future prepared for his whole nation. He questioned the patron, therefore, pretty narrowly, on the income and belongings of this ornament to the tribe.

"For," said he, "it seems but fair as she should share and share alike with you and me. She's a Romany, whether or no: nothing can wash it out of her, not if she married a hundred Gorgios: and being a Romany, she must abide by Romany laws. She's broken one of the strictest already, and by rights she ought to be called to account."

"What!" exclaimed Jack, in a voice of thunder, that brought the potboy running into the room, when Jericho, with admirable presence of mind, ordered another measure of gin and cloves.

"Look ye here, my lad!" and the old boxer laid his formidable fist on the table: "there was a chap at Guildford Races, the Hero of Hexham they called him in the ring, as up and spoke disrespectful of my Shuri. His pals

had to lift him into a trap, and take him back to Hexham that same arternoon, and it wasn't a matter of three rounds at most. There was a swell, a lord of Parliament, he was, as tried to put an affront on my pretty, only t'other night in London streets. If ever he's come to again, he thinks as a horse kicked him, I know! Here's your health, Jerry: you're a honest lad, and you means well; but don't you let your tongue run too fast, a-jawin' about my lass. If you and me was to fall out I might larn you a trick or two of the old trade, and it would be a bad job for both!"

So Jericho discreetly changed the subject, but none the less did he resolve, that whatever good fortune had befallen his gipsy kinswoman, he would have his share.

CHAPTER XLIV

WESTWARD HO!

AND now her very life became a burden to Beltenebrosa under their exactions. The elder claimed her time, the younger gipsy her money, without scruple or apology, as a matter of right. Old Jack was to be seen reeling up the pretty staircase to the drawing-room floor every afternoon, with unfailing regularity, at the same hour and in the same state; while Jericho, looking thoroughly like a member of the swell mob in his flash clothes and sham jewellery, wore his hat in her presence, and smoked incessantly, without the slightest regard to proprieties of time or place. The landlady's manner grew suspicious —an elderly *gentlewoman*, as she called herself, on the ground floor, gave notice to quit; and even the servants treated their handsome lodger with less respect than when first she came into the house. They had been very proud of her then, boasting to small tradesmen, followers, and other associates, that she was a foreigner of noble extraction and boundless wealth. Now they wondered if a person who received such friends as Jack and Jericho could be barely respectable, anticipating a solution of the whole mystery at an early date before some worthy magistrate in Bow Street. But that she paid ready money, and always allowed herself to be systematically cheated out of small sums, a detective would have been called in long ago, to find, as usual, very little that he could detect; but even this questionable voucher seemed about to fail her, in consequence of the inroads made on her purse by the low extravagances of her gipsy kinsfolk. Jack, indeed, observed some limit in his demands, and so long as he had money enough in his pocket to treat a boon-companion, and thoroughly moisten his own clay in a public-house, troubled his daughter only with interminable maunderings about her mother and maudlin

professions of affection for herself; but Jericho was not so easily satisfied, and had her modest hundreds been increased to thousands, it seemed that his repeated inroads would have exhausted them all.

Now he required such a suit of clothes from a fashionable tailor as should do justice to the good looks he was conscious of possessing; anon he could not do without a gold watch: all *gentlemen* wore them, and a gold watch, unlike other ornaments, was as good as a bank-note; it would fetch its price in sovereigns when he was obliged to put it "up the spout." Small change, too, of course he must have in his pockets. How could he refuse to treat a friend of either sex? A man must not forego the duties of his position; and Jericho talked, perhaps felt, as if he were really a person of property and character. Since his enlistment in the ranks of professional crime, as distinguished from the occasional dishonesty of a gipsy's life, he had found himself well supplied with ready money, and had contracted expensive tastes, foreign to his early habits indeed, but extremely agreeable to his half-savage nature, which he grudged no effort to indulge. It seemed no part of his character to run unnecessary risk, and he was the last man to take the chance of imprisonment, particularly with hard labour, in the acquisition of funds, when he need only swagger up a flight of stairs into a lady's drawing-room, ask for what he wanted, and swagger down again. Such rogues never seem to realise the possibility of killing the goose with the golden eggs, of heaping feathers on the camel's back till it breaks; and he repeated the process over and over again, forgetting that no well is perfectly inexhaustible, and it can only be a question of time how soon the insatiable bucket comes up dry.

Beltenebrosa was now going through a process which most of us experience at one period or another of our lives, out of which we ought to come improved, and at anyrate do come somewhat sobered and reclaimed. According to her lights, which were of the faintest,—only a glimmer, so to speak, through palpable darkness,—she was endeavouring to do right. Looking back on her past life, how empty it seemed! how aimless! how useless! The very prizes for which she strove were so worthless when won! the chaplets that crowned her such withered leaves after all! What had she tried for? Happiness? Yes; but did she ever attain it, or even a good imitation of it? Not when

she, the gipsy foundling, saw herself an object of envy and admiration among the great ones of the earth. Not on that memorable day when she sat at a royal table, and men who were making history in Europe vied with each other to carry her parasol and shawl. Not when she walked by the blue Mediterranean with the young husband who, whatever might have been his shortcomings, thought no price too high for her approval and regard, nor regretted for a moment to have offended relatives, friends, neighbours, and all the prejudices he had imbibed from childhood, to make her his own. Not when she escaped with him from these very kinsmen who now so tormented her, in the memorable ride on Potboy ; that furnished keen excitement and an enlivening sense of enterprise—nothing more. Not when she first tasted the sweets of liberty and independence, leading the life of a lady bachelor in the little street off Long Acre. No, not even in that moment of triumph, when she saw Mervyn Strange at her feet, and the grave young clergyman, who with his body worshipped her, with *half* his worldly goods did her endow! While she looked in his honest, loving eyes, she was near the happiness she had dreamed of for a short five minutes, but did not quite attain it even then.

There must have been something strangely amiss, she began to think, in the objects of her life, and its whole conduct, or she could not have been thus baffled in pursuit of a desire that eluded her so persistently from day to day and from year to year. She had not yet learned her lesson. She did not know that just as all great discoveries are made when science is looking for something else, and men blunder into truth as Columbus blundered into America, so those who seek after Happiness always fail to find her, while she comes of her own free will to visit him who is content to mate with Duty, sitting soberly at home.

Beltenebrosa entertained some vague notion that her legitimate task was to be performed in the care of her drunken old father and reprobate kinsman. It arose partly from a sense of natural affection, instinctive rather than intelligent, partly from the dislike to solitude and the desire of being necessary to somebody, which are such essential attributes of the female character.

She tried hard to bear with both her tormentors, but gave way under the infliction.

One afternoon, old Jack being fast asleep and help-

"I don't understand you"

lessly drunk in the back drawing-room, Jericho made his appearance, with a cigar in his mouth, and a glossy hat, very much aslant, on his head. He made no attempt to remove either of these ornaments from respect to his hostess, and sat himself down on her sofa in a free-and-easy manner, which made her long that her sturdy young husband could come back alive, if only for five minutes, to kick him out.

"Sister," said he, knocking the ashes off his cigar with a slender, tawny, over-ringed finger, "I wants to have a bit of a chat with you. No, I ain't going to ask for money this time—not a dump! But it's a matter of business too. I've been thinking a good deal about *you* of late. It's a rum thing, sister, you come between me and my sleep."

"Well?" she asked, rising haughtily to her feet, roused by something in his manner to an impulse of anger and defiance that she could not control.

He jerked his thumb towards the next room, where Jack's snores could be heard rising and falling in sonorous regularity.

"He's failing, sister," said Jericho; "the patron's about done. He's on his last legs; he says so hisself. Now, it's on my mind, this is, and I can't shake it off nohow. Suppose as the patron was to go under, what's to become of you?"

She stared at him in angry surprise. "Become of me?" she repeated. "I don't understand you. If anything should happen to—to my father, I might perhaps go to Brighton for change of air, and of course I could not have *you* coming in and out at all hours; but that is the only difference it would make in my daily life."

"Steady!" he interrupted. "You talk big—very big. You seem to have forgotten"—

"Forgotten what?"

"Your marriage and its price. You haven't worked it out, sister. It's hanging over you now, the same as the first day you left me on my back in the heather to ride off with your Gorgio lover. It's bad enough to marry out of your tribe, but it's death—d'ye mind me?—*death* to marry out of your nation!"

"Nonsense! I've had enough of this. You can't frighten me any more with your old woman's tales. You threaten freely, but you seem to forget that bloodshed is

a game two may play at, and perhaps I can draw a trigger as easy as you can a knife."

His cheek blanched, and she marked his eye scan her dress and figure as if to see whether she carried a pistol concealed about her person.

The empty threat seemed to have cowed him. He removed his hat, laid down his cigar, and continued in a more humble tone.

"There's no call for that, sister, so long as Jericho Lee can stand upright. I've watched over your safety, ah! much oftener than you think. I'd like to watch over it always. Sister, you've been a Gorgio's widow; will you come back to your people and be a Romany's wife? Now it's out. Give me an answer, yes or no."

She was speechless with indignation. In her most desponding moments she had never contemplated such a come-down as this. That Jericho was to be a tax on her resources, a recurring annoyance, an importunate beggar, to be alternately bought off and driven away—to this she was in a manner reconciled; but that he should presume to offer himself to her—*her*—the Beltenebrosa of last season—as a husband, was an insult so outrageous as to seem positively incredible even now.

She drew herself up, and her eyes fairly blazed with anger while she replied, measuring him from top to toe with glances of unspeakable scorn.

"If you had asked for a place as my footman, I should have said you were not tall enough, and your character would not bear inquiry! To your unheard-of impertinence I answer simply this, that I recommend you to walk out by the door before the patron wakes, or most assuredly you will have to leave by the window!"

Then she marched like a queen into the next room, where old Jack was sleeping, and locked the door.

She did not see the dangerous scowl on Jericho's face while he went downstairs into the street by the safer route she had suggested; but none the less did she resolve that the time had come to put a stop to this persecution, once for all. It had only needed some such climax as the foregoing to bring matters to a head, and with that promptitude for action which she inherited from her father, she decided on leaving London immediately, and effectually giving her gipsy friends the slip.

She kissed the old man's forehead as he lay sleeping

heavily on the sofa, and was surprised at her own weakness. She made up a packet of bank-notes, every shilling she could spare, and thrust them into his pocket. She paid her rent, and a week extra in lieu of notice, packed up her things, sent for a cab, and was at Paddington station before the patron woke from his drunken slumbers, or Jericho had thoroughly digested the insult he considered himself to have received.

She could not have explained, perhaps, why she should travel by this particular railway out of London, or analyse an instinct that impelled her to fly for safety to the west, as some noble red deer, hunted from his leafy haunts by horn and hound, stretches across the glorious wilds of Somerset and Devon, westward, westward still, by coomb and copse, boulder and bracken, rugged glen and russet moorland, till he makes his plunge for liberty and death, forty fathoms of sheer descent, into the Severn Sea.

Let us hope that the sufferings of the hunted are in no proportion to the keen, engrossing pleasure enjoyed by those who hunt.

Beltenebrosa, to carry on the metaphor, harboured, found, and fairly forced into the open, determined to make her point. It was natural, perhaps, that she should fly to the other end of the kingdom; but why she selected Boarshaven as her city of refuge, I leave to be explained by those who are more versed than I am in the complicated mechanism of a woman's heart.

The town is dirty and over-populated; the streets are narrow, ill smelling, and ill paved; every third door seems to open on a slop-shop, every fourth on a public-house. The inhabitants are an amphibious race, never by any chance clean, though constantly wet through: the men wear Guernsey frocks, with high canvas trousers, and the shortest of cotton braces; the women, limp stuff dresses of a neutral tint, that cling so helplessly about the figure as to forbid the idea of there being anything but the wearer underneath. Forests of masts, rising from brigs and schooners, look as if they grew in the very streets. There is no sand nor shingle, but abundance of mud, and all the smells of a seaport rest in the atmosphere, except the free salt air of ocean itself.

"First to Boarshaven; single."

She wondered whether she would ever come back even while she took her ticket, but concerned herself little

about her boxes, which a stalwart porter, diligent in the service of well-dressed ladies travelling alone, and good for shillings—certain, when he put them in their compartments after duly labelling, was wheeling to the platform, because she was too much engaged in speculating on the result of this new step. She had opened, so to speak, a fresh volume in the history of her life: was it to be eventful? had it a hero? and how would it end?

Though accustomed to admiration, and preoccupied besides about her future, she did not yet fail to notice that she had made a great impression on a diminutive youth, conspicuous for an extremely tall hat, who was lounging about the purlieus of the station, as if waiting for a train. This little personage, with his pale Cockney face and sharp twinkling eyes, seemed of a very observant nature, and found in Beltenebrosa an object that riveted his whole attention from the moment she entered the booking-office. Never in his life had he beheld such a woman, and he felt he could not admire her enough! He was at her side while she took her ticket, he followed her to the carriage when she got in, he saw her give the porter a shilling and buy a *Punch* of the newsboy, and, as she glided smoothly away from the platform, rejoicing that she was outward bound at last, he stared after her, open-mouthed, with an imbecile expression, that much belied his native cunning, on his pale face, and his tall hat pushed to the very back of his head.

CHAPTER XLV

MAHOGANY PARLOUR

A NARROW room with sanded floor, divided into boxes by high wooden partitions; tables and benches worn and stained with use; a low roof, windows well shuttered and secured, so as to keep out the slightest breath of air; articles of property, such as baskets, shawls, handkerchiefs, and greatcoats, lying about so carelessly as to verify the proverb that there is honour among thieves; a smell of ardent spirits pervading the atmosphere; and a potman moving through clouds of tobacco-smoke, with shirt-sleeves rolled to the shoulders, and long sinewy arms, that looked as if they could hit out with the force of a catapult: "the Kangaroo," though a light-weight, is no contemptible bruiser, and an ugly customer in more senses than one.

This haunt is called by its frequenters Mahogany Parlour, not because its furniture is constructed of that imperishable substance, as might naturally be supposed, but on account of a certain drink that first came into vogue here with the swell mob, introduced by a travelled gentleman, who had learned to appreciate its merits in the New World. Gin and treacle, mixed in due proportion, under the name of "Mahogany," is a compound that finds favour with the lumberers of Canada and the Western States, men who live hard and athletic lives, felling and floating timber in primeval forests for nine months of the year, and spend the other three in drink and dissipation in the Settlements.

It agreed better, perhaps, with these stalwart heroes than with the London thieves, a puny race, relying on

cunning more than courage, and skill of brain more than strength of arm.

Fighting Jack, who was, so to speak, an honorary member of this select society, tolerated for his personal prowess, but labouring under the disadvantage of comparative honesty, could drink Mahogany or anything else; but Jack was seldom able to form a distinct idea now, and whether his gin had or had not been adulterated with treacle, consumed so much as to render him hopeless of body and utterly idiotic of mind.

Waking up in her back drawing-room to find no daughter and a bundle of bank-notes in his pocket, he brought his intellects to bear on such a coincidence with considerable difficulty, but managed to infer that she must have gone away for a definite period, and that his best plan would be to consult Jericho on their future proceedings without delay. So he staggered off to Mahogany Parlour, where he found, as he expected, his kinsman and prime adviser smoking cigars, while treating two fair companions to some execrable champagne. Of this beverage Jack was *not* drunk enough to partake, but desiring the Kangaroo to place some undiluted spirits on another table, he drew his kinsman aside and imparted the startling information with which he was charged.

Jerry had plenty of self-command. The scowl of rage, spite, and disappointment that passed like a shadow over his dark, good-looking, bad-looking face vanished with the mouthful of spirits he swallowed to soothe his vexation, and he observed calmly, "I suppose as you didn't think of following her, or taking of the number of her cab, or getting anyways on her track?"

"How could I do that?" expostulated the other; "didn't I tell ye as I was resting on the sofy, and someway I think I must have been asleep—a kind of dog-sleep, you know. But she can't be gone fur, and if you thinks, Jerry, as she'd be taking a ride in a cab or such like, why, we've as good as got our hand on her. I knows lots of cabmen, bless ye, and every man on 'em would be willing to do me a turn. I'm about told out, Jerry, but there's here and there a one yet as respects old Jack!"

The younger gipsy reflected. To embark on a search or any other undertaking requiring common prudence with the patron would be to ensure failure. Mind and body, the old boxer was indeed on his last legs, and Jericho

bethought him, with an evil smile, how much more promising would be his own future when no longer hampered by the companionship of this worn-out kinsman, with his addled brains, incautious tongue, stubborn courage, and inconvenient notions regarding right and wrong.

"His money would pretty nigh set me up," thought Jericho, speculating, though he was only a gipsy, how his senior would "cut up," with as little scruple as if he had been a Christian gentleman of birth and education: "he can't have pulled out less than twenty pounds in notes when he paid for his gin. Twenty pounds! It would come in very handy! And as for the old man, I could do better without him. He's fit for nothing now. Every dog has his day!"

So he plied Jack with more liquor, pressing him to drink with the ladies he had just left, whose voices were to be heard rising in loud, shrill laughter as the champagne mounted to their brains, and seated him between them like Macheath in the *Beggars' Opera*, well satisfied with his position. Then Jerry, lighting another cigar, pondered how he was to get on the track of Mrs. Paravant, and hunt her down once more.

"I was allus a ladies' man," said a voice in the adjoining box, which he had no difficulty in recognising as that of a promising young pickpocket with whom he had done a business some weeks ago, whose diminutive size and extreme self-assumption had earned him the nickname of Buster; "but I never see such a one-er! Dress! o' course she was dressed 'andsome: black, I tell ye, plain and genteel, with the gloss on, fresh out of a mourning warehouse, I know. But there! it wasn't her dress as fetched me. Them two in the next box is *dressed* 'andsome enough; but you might as well talk of twopenn'orth of ginger-pop alongside of a bottle of cham'!"

"Did you speak to her?" asked a pale, unhappy looking girl, for whose edification this pocket hero seemed to be holding forth.

"Well, I did *not* speak to her, Molly, and that's the truth," replied Buster. "I ain't easy dashed, 'specially with the women, as *you* knows, Molly. But, someway, this here looked like a queen, and there—I dursn't! So pale she was, and so tall, with her hair as black as jet, and eyes that flashed like a pair of candles. I'll tell you what,

Molly: if a red-nosed chap had gone for to kiss her, I think they'd have blowed his head off!"

Molly, a fair, undersized girl, who would have looked washed-out but that she was so dirty, seemed restlessly inclined to change the subject; but Jericho, overhearing his young friend's glowing description, began to think it just possible so transcendent a beauty might be the very person whose destination he wanted to find out.

"My service to you," said he, politely offering to stand any beverage they fancied, as he leaned over this young couple in their box. "What! he's been at his old games, has he, miss? Ah, he's a good judge, is Buster. I said so myself the first Sunday I see him walking out with *you*."

Poor Molly smiled, and Buster, emptying his glass, performed a most conceited wink.

"That's wot I was a-tellin' her," said he; "but bless ye! there was no mistake about the stunner I seen to-day. If I thought as she'd ever come back, blowed if I wouldn't rent one of them large houses opposite Paddington station, and live in the first-floor front."

"Paddington station," repeated Jericho, dreading lest an inflection of his voice should betray his interest, and speaking as carelessly as he could. "Oh! that's where you goes wife-hunting, is it? I suppose you wouldn't take me with you to-morrow, just for a show! there's no harm in looking, you know."

The other grinned.

"'Tain't no use," said he, "she's far enough by now; I seen her ticket. First-class, I tell ye. Oh! a real lady, no mistake about that. If I hadn't been short of small change, just for once in a way, blessed if I wouldn't have gone with her. But it's a matter of two quid to Boarshaven, and I'd got nothing in my pocket but threehap'orth o' coppers, and a pewter half-crown as I took in this werry parlour. So I'll have to do with Molly here, and the other, she'll have to do without me!"

"Boarshaven's a long way," observed Jerry, with an unmoved countenance. "'Tother end of nowheres. I fancy you're a sight more comfortable here; better company, too. Good-evening, Buster! good-evening, miss! Don't you let him go to Paddington station no more!"

So Jericho took his leave, followed by the admiring glances of these young people, who considered him a vastly

agreeable man, of polished manners, rising to the top of his profession.

Notwithstanding his confidence in Buster's quick eye and correct taste, he resolved to verify that observer's account by an immediate visit to Paddington station, whilst the events of the day were fresh in the minds of such officials as he knew how to cross-examine, with the assistance of a few pleasant words and a drop of beer. If, as he suspected, Mrs. Paravant had fled for safety to a remote and obscure refuge, he would follow in due time, that is to say, as soon as he was out of funds; meanwhile he would give old Jack the slip, temporarily, while he prosecuted his researches—perhaps permanently, when he had resolved on some definite course. Friendless and unprotected, the courage that had sustained his prey must give way at last, and the next time he asked, perhaps she might look less contemptuously on his suit.

Jerry's own experience of women had taught him that violent outbursts of anger often fade to unconditional surrender and collapse; but, he told himself at the same time, he had no fancy for such breezes, and that his personal courage was unequal to so keen an encounter as he had that day sustained.

CHAPTER XLVI

OUTWARD BOUND

THE patron, sitting between his fair companions, seemed quite satisfied with his position, and though not strictly handsome, nor attired in the best taste, their manners were lively and accommodating, while any superfluous energy of speech or gesture might be attributed to the champagne, of which, having already partaken freely, they were persuaded to share another bottle. The Kangaroo, indeed, who brought it, seemed to regard the whole proceeding with covert displeasure, intimating as much in dumb show, that Jack was too far gone to mark or comprehend. This young pugilist entertained for the famous veteran feelings of mingled envy and admiration; he scanned with emotion the wreck of that finely built form, which had come victorious out of one of the gamest battles ever fought in the ring. He would have given a crown to see the old hero strip, a pound and more to put the gloves on with him, not to contend—far be it from him!—but to watch his attitudes in all humility and respect. He regarded him much as the soldiers of the first Napoleon did Marshal Ney, or as we used, forty years ago, to regard the great Duke of Wellington.

Of the ladies who supported his idol at either side, he had the lowest opinion; believing them, not without reason, capable of picking his hero's pocket, to leave him drunk and helpless in the street. It seemed impossible, however, to impart such an opinion to Jack, who was fast attaining his usual state, and the Ganymede of this Olympus had, besides, quite enough on his own hands in the matter of supplying orders and scrutinising small change.

A final glass of gin, neat and sparkling, settled his business at last, and the old gipsy sank forward between

his fair supporters, fast asleep, against the table, with his head on his crossed arms.

Said one of the free companions, in a whisper that was only to be interpreted by the movement of her lips: "Share and share alike?"

"Honour?" returned the other below her breath.

"Right!" was the reply, with the faintest symptoms of a wink; and no further explanation seemed required.

"It won't do here, though," murmured the first speaker, glancing suspiciously round. "There's Redhead watching like a cat at a mouse-hole."

"Redhead be blowed!" answered her "lady friend," as she called her, an impulsive and plain-spoken young woman. "If I'd been missus here—and I might have been too, Susan, if I'd thought well—that there Kangaroo would have had the key of the street three months ago. I wish he was dead, I do!"

"It's no use wishing," replied Susan, who seemed a practical person enough, except in the matter of dress, "nor talking neither. Wot's o'clock, my dear? I think I could relish a cup of strong black tea; bitter strong," she added, sinking her voice; "and that will sober him for a time if anything can, and we wouldn't want to keep him long."

So the strong black tea was brought, and Fighting Jack, with a good deal of pushing and pinching, was roused to partake of it, when he recovered sufficiently to stand on his legs and leave the thieves' haunt, supported by these two ladies, who expressed a charitable intention of seeing him home. The Kangaroo looked wistfully after his retreating figure, and shook his head.

The night was mild, with a soft west wind blowing, that even in the purlieus of Leicester Square breathed cool and fresh on Jack's throbbing temples and heated face. But the open air soon mollified the sobering effects of tea, and his guides found no little difficulty in steering their charge from lamp-post to lamp-post. He was a heavy man still, and lurched forward, ever and anon, with a sway that nearly sent all three to the ground, and they laughed, of course, and chattered incessantly, but held on like grim death the while. Presently Susan plunged her hand in his pocket, to abstract three five-pound notes, a few sovereigns, and some loose silver, half of which plunder, as she pro-

tested, and indeed swore, she tendered her companion on the spot.

"We've done with the old bloke now," said she; "and the sooner we makes our lucky, the better! Take care, Carrie! we mustn't let go, not both at once, or he'll never keep on his jolly old legs. Good-night, my dear; you and me had best not be seen together. Good-night!"

In spite of her precautions, however, and though deprived, by judicious degrees, of his charming supports, old Jack seemed quite unable to steer his own course without assistance, and bumped heavily against a lamp-post, to which he clung, looking about him in perfect good-humour and content.

Susan was round the corner and half way to her miserable home in the twinkling of an eye, well satisfied with her share of the robbery, which amounted to three-fourths of the whole sum purloined. Caroline, on the contrary, commonly called The Shiner, from her bright apparel, could not forbear hovering round their victim a little longer, with certain instincts of womanly compunction that, unsexed as it was, still remained in her weak, depraved, unhappy heart.

Like Hood's ruined Magdalen, shivering at the door of the palace where her destroyer feasted with his friends, it might have been said of poor Caroline—

> She who now shrinks from the wintry weather,
> Ah! she once had a village fame;
> Listened to love on the moonlit heather,
> Had gentleness, vanity, maiden shame.

Youth, innocence, and happiness had faded in a past that The Shiner tried hard to forget, succeeding, to tell the truth, in haunts of vice for many hours at a time; but do what she would, memory persisted in tormenting her on occasions, and none knew better than herself how sad and solitary was the so-called gaiety of the life she led.

"I can't let the old man lie in the street," thought this miserable Samaritan. "He's no more able to take care of himself than a babby at the breast. And them peelers, if they runs him in, they'll have no mercy. Likely as not, leave him upside down in the Stone Jug till morning. Then he'll die, and I'll see him every night in my sleep. I wish I'd never come nigh here; I wish I hadn't touched his money; I wish I'd let the whole jolly business be. Ah! if we gets to wishing, I wish I'd never been born!"

Then she returned to the gipsy, detached him from his lamp-post, and although her own lair was in a contrary direction, supported his wavering steps towards the West End.

Her nerves were weak. How could they be otherwise in the life she led? And the conduct of her charge tried them severely. Though some animal instinct, such as leads a dying wolf to its den, guided him homewards, old Jack's head was quite gone. All along Piccadilly he rambled in his talk, as though delirious from fever rather than drink; not that he was violent, indeed, or offensive in any way, but wholly beside himself, and unconscious of his surroundings. By degrees, as his mind failed, his step grew firmer, and his bodily vigour seemed to return. When they reached Hyde Park he left his companion's arm to walk on unassisted, and made shift to explain he was well able to take care of himself.

"But thank ye kindly, miss," observed Jack, with great politeness, and some hazy notion that his guide, in common propriety, ought to accompany him no farther. "Our way lies apart now, very wide apart, young woman, or I'd ask you home to take a cup o' tea or what not, in the camp. But I'm married, my lass, though you wouldn't think it, and my Shuri she's not best pleased when I've been on the burst for a bit, like this here, unless I comes home alone. You'll excuse me, my dear, but it's best to speak the truth when you've got to do with women. I wish you good-night kindly, miss. You make the best of your way home: there's some precious scamps about; but if any of them offers to say anything to you, don't you be dashed; you speak up, and tell 'em Fighting Jack—that's me, my dear—isn't regular out of the ring yet. They haven't forgot, never fear! And look ye, my lass, I ain't got no watch on me—I put mine up the spout last week—but I ought to have a matter of seventeen or eighteen quid in my pocket. I'm trying to find it now. You're welcome to it—all—all—free! You'd maybe want to get back to your friends. Ah! you'd better be at home than in this here town. But spend it to please yourself. What am I, to advise the like of you? Dash it all! I'm such a heedless chap! I must have dropped it somewheres!"

Caroline's heart smote her, the tears were running down her wasted cheeks. She produced her share of the stolen property, and pressed it into his reluctant hand.

"Take it," said she, sobbing; "it's your own, every brass farden of it! And—and—don't think bad of me. I wasn't always a gay woman. I was a good girl once."

He put it away from him with a strange smile, and either the gaslight deceived her or there was the look in his eyes of one who sees something a long way off.

"Bless ye, it's no use to me!" he answered. "Why, the battle-money's got to be paid to-night, and I shall have a sight more than I can spend. Besides, my dear, I shan't want for nothing where I'm a-goin'; there's plenty for all—men, women, and little bare-legged children—and never a mag to pay! Commons stretching as far as you can see, with the furze-bloom shining on 'em, and dazzling like gold, and the blue sky coming right down to the ground on every side, without stack or chimney, or so much as a barn, to spoil the view. Woods with sticks for the gathering, hen-pheasants, rabbits, and a fallow buck or two, as tame as goats. Streams, my dear, with trout leaping up into the sunshine, and pools you can see the fish basking in, like shadows of their own selves, always fat and always hungry. I've a tent of my own under an oak, the biggest tree in the whole blessed forest, and a kettle that simmers all day long, and they're only waiting to begin supper till the patron comes home. There's the lads and lasses, I can see them plain enough—fine, wiry, active young chaps!—black-browed girls, as straight as willow-wands, bringing the firewood in and skimming the pot, so as you can smell the stew a mile off! All for old Jack!—all against the patron comes home! And—yes! I knowed it! There she is, standing out in front, shading her eyes with her hand—my Shuri, as beautiful as a queen, wondering what has kept me so long—looking, longing, wearying to see her own old Fighting Jack again. What a lot we'll have to say to each other! We're not used to be parted, her and me; but that's done with now. My Shuri! I'm never a-going to leave you no more. Good-night, miss, I can't stop no longer; but I'll tell my Shuri how polite you was to her old man, helping of him along the road, and precious rough it were, till you brought him to the end. I'll not forget. Thank you kindly, miss, and good-night!"

She was terribly frightened, yet loath to let him walk on by himself, thus lost to all realities, through the darkness of the park, into which he insisted on plunging,

affirming that it was the nearest way to the camp he seemed so desirous to reach.

"Won't you think better of it?" she expostulated. "Let you and me keep in the street, where there's light. We knows the ins and outs there; but you can't dodge a peeler with a bull's-eye under them trees in the dark."

"Peeler?" repeated the old prize-fighter, clenching his fist; "I'd like to see the best peeler as ever wore a hat offer to come between me and my Shuri. I'd spoil him so as his inspector wouldn't never know him no more. But I can't spare the time to stand talking here all night. Once again, miss, I wish you good-evening."

She nerved herself for a final effort, and deserved as much credit for valour as the hero who leads a storming party. Probably the one thing she most dreaded on earth was to be alone at midnight with a madman in Hyde Park; but she resolved to risk it.

"Take me with you," she urged. "I've come a long walk. I'm tired to death, and you can't refuse to give me shelter."

He passed his hand over his forehead with a gesture that seemed like a blessing.

"It's not to be done, my dear," he answered kindly. "You couldn't come where I'm a-going. Maybe you wouldn't want to if you knowed."

And with a wave of his powerful arm, that seemed to forbid any attempt at following, he walked away steadily through the park gates into the night.

CHAPTER XLVII

"HAVE I FOUND THEE, O MINE ENEMY?"

LORD ST. MORITZ as a valetudinarian! It provoked him exceedingly; he hated to be told of it; but the doctor and his own feelings warned him that unless he began to take care of himself, he might become a confirmed invalid for life! He had always acted on the principle that Nature is our best guide, and doubtless, under certain severe restrictions, this may be a sufficiently wise rule for the preservation of health; but it must not be adopted according to his lordship's interpretation, that whatever you fancy is sure to do you good. Eat when you are hungry, certainly, but not four courses and a dessert. Drink also when thirsty, but less than a bottle of dry champagne and another of loaded claret at the same meal; while anybody who smokes as much as he feels inclined must necessarily consume a great deal more tobacco than is good for his nerves or digestion. Amusement, too, though excellent when taken sparingly, is not half so healthy a tonic in excess as hard work; and an over-dose of it, acting through the brain, brings on that sense of mental and bodily prostration which society has consented to particularise by the term "bored."

This is a state to which, like some epidemics, those are most liable who hold it in the greatest horror, and Lord St. Moritz all his life had certainly taken pains to avoid the slightest symptoms of the disease. Nevertheless, even his lordship was but mortal, and found himself at last not only ailing in health and weakened by infirmity, but exceedingly bored with the remedial treatment he was compelled to undergo. It was no wonder he failed at last; even such a constitution as his could not but succumb to many consecutive years of good living, late hours, excitement, dissipation, and unscrupulous self-indulgence, followed up by an encounter with a professed pugilist, in which he had

sustained a blow that might have felled an ox. He did not leave his room for a week, nor visit his club for a fortnight; and even when all outward marks of the brawl had disappeared, felt that his whole system was shaken and his digestion completely upset. The accident, as he chose to call it, fortunately occurred in the hunting season, so that inquiries could be parried by the usual explanation, "a bad fall." The most officious of friends, justly dreading detailed accounts of such a catastrophe, pursued their researches no further; but with his doctor he was obliged to be more candid, and that sage, though he smiled hopefully, pronounced no decided opinion, but shook his head.

"We must be careful," protested the medicine man. "We must avoid late hours, fatigue, unnecessary excitement. No, he should not recommend the sea; what we required was perfect quiet, and freedom from exertion of mind or body. We must avoid annoyance, vexation of any kind; and parliamentary or other duties had better be postponed for some weeks. We should eat plain nourishing food, at regular hours, little and often. Yes, sound old wine, certainly; two or three glasses—no more; but a cigar could not prudently be allowed. Early rising would be most beneficial, and a walk, weather permitting, every morning before breakfast. Such a treatment, and the prescription, would soon set us on our legs again. When? —Ah! that was impossible to promise, but before very long, and—Thank you; yes, another visit about the same hour to-morrow."

Then the doctor bowed himself out, smooth, polite, smiling, and went to attend Mrs. Stripwell, who was quite well, parrying with considerable tact the inquiries made by that lady concerning his lordship's constitution, ailments, and general habits of life.

Not having seen him since his mysterious disappearance from the theatre, when he left her in charge of "poor Algy," curiosity, with a spice of pique, had so tormented her, that she mistook it for a softer feeling; and being one of those ladies who prefer what they have *not* to what they have, she entertained a romantic notion of obtaining access to the patient in the disguise of a nurse, and ministering to his wants till he got well. She did not put it in practice, for many reasons: she hated quiet, she hated trouble, she hated everything but amusement, and a sick-room bored her to death.

By calling in the same doctor, however, who was a pleasant-spoken person and a great favourite with ladies, she secured half an hour's delightful gossip, and the latest particulars of his interesting patient, with the certainty that her inquiries would be duly reported to him at the next visit. All this was cheap at a sovereign, and Lord St. Moritz had not been confined to his room eight-and-forty hours before Mrs. Stripwell began to fancy her liver was torpid, her lungs were touched, her nerves affected, and her whole system wanted tone, which could only be restored by medical advice at least once a day.

Among other particulars she learned that Lord St. Moritz was ordered to walk before breakfast, and she actually proposed doing such violence to her habits as to get out of bed at daybreak, that she might meet him by chance, and share with him this distasteful discipline. So her maid called her at seven o'clock for three consecutive mornings, till the effort was found to be impossible, and the project had to be given up.

Nevertheless, though it is a penance for man or woman to rise before the accustomed time, and for the former to shave by candlelight, an early walk in Hyde Park is not without its reward. The air seems cleaner—as it is fresher—than at any other period of the twenty-four hours; and if there should be a touch of hoar-frost, such as often succeeds a mild winter's night, much beauty, enhanced by the accompanying mist, not fog, is to be admired in every branch and twig of the leafless trees, magnified to twice their natural size by a coating of condensed dew, like the sugar on the ornaments of a wedding-cake in a confectioner's shop.

Lord St. Moritz, swinging along by the Serpentine at the rate of four miles an hour, well wrapped up, and glowing with that convalescence which, perhaps from the force of contrast, seems even more enjoyable than health, began to think the world was not such a bad place after all, and Hyde Park, though he seemed to have it pretty well to himself, no unpleasant resort at eight a.m. on a winter's day.

There were comparatively few of his fellow-creatures about, but he took the more note of those he saw. A squadron of the Life Guards on watering order filed leisurely past him at a walk. The good black troopers, with their rough coats on, looked smaller than usual under

their lengthy riders, who bestrode them barebacked, longing during this coldest of parades for the warmth of stable duties, and subsequent consolation of the pipe. Then a brougham rolled speedily by, and inside, smoking a cigarette, in a brown ulster, he recognised a friend on his way (per rail) to hunt with the Rothschilds in the Vale of Aylesbury, forty miles off, to return again at night. For a moment, in anticipation of the excellent day's sport this enthusiast was almost sure to enjoy, he wished to accompany him; but presently reflected that the fences were somewhat stiff, and the ground deep, in the land of grass, where he was bound; that Mentmore stags had a perverse tendency to run straight in an opposite direction from their home; that twenty miles back to the station with a tired horse, followed by forty more on a railway, possibly wet through, was inconsistent with his ideas of happiness, and that altogether he could spend his day more pleasantly in London.

Meantime, his friend, who loved a hunt, good, bad, or indifferent, better than any amusement on earth, had finished his cigarette and was out of sight. After this, he met a telegraph-boy with a worsted comforter round his neck, bearer, no doubt, of some important message, loitering to throw stones at the ducks, followed by a plainly dressed, modest-looking, brown-haired girl, who could only be a daily governess. She walked fast and well: she looked bright, happy, and good. One moment some evil spirit whispered that she might prove a pleasant acquaintance; the next, his better angel told him he ought to be ashamed of himself; and his lordship strode off in another direction, where the mist hung lower and the grass grew thicker, towards breakfast and home.

"What a beast the fellow is to be so drunk at this time in the morning!" he thought, as he came upon the prostrate figure of a man, lying face downwards, with a coating of white frost still unmelted on his broad motionless back. His lordship's first impulse was to pass by, as did the priest and the Levite, on the other side; but a strange instinctive horror came over him like a chill, with the certain foreboding that what he saw stretched out there, stark and quiet, he must no longer call *him*, but *it!* He ran in, nevertheless, readily enough, though he knew it was too late, to turn the figure over on its back with some difficulty, for it was large and heavy, and he himself

encumbered with a greatcoat. Then he loosened the handkerchief round its neck, unclasped the rigid hands, which had turned a yellowish-grey already, and exclaimed—

"No use! no use! the man must have been dead for hours."

He spoke louder than he intended, for the exclamation brought to his side a policeman, looming very large through the mist, who, recognising his lordship for a gentleman, dismissed from his mind certain crude notions of hocussing, robbery, and a well-dressed ruffian, which had crossed it with the first glimpse he caught of the situation.

"What's up here?" he asked, sternly enough, but added, with a finger to his helmet, "I'm afraid, sir, as it's all over with the party. This man will never move a finger no more. You're not a medical gentleman, be you, sir?" for his comprehensive mind had already taken in the official report, coroner's inquest, and nature of the evidence.

"Not I," answered the other; "I wish I were. But all the doctors in London can do him no good."

"Right you are!" replied the policeman. "Look here, sir," and he pointed to the frozen dews on the hair and face of the corpse: "this man has been cold since daybreak."

Lord St. Moritz started: scanning the calm fixed face, with its firm jaw and grizzled eyebrows, the truth flashed upon him. It was indeed his old antagonist, the prize-fighter, who had mauled him so severely, but for whose rough usage he would not now have been walking in Hyde Park at this early hour. He owed him a turn, he had often told himself of late, and it would go hard but he should find means to pay the score! Yes, he had earnestly wished to meet his enemy again, but not like this!

Fighting Jack looked very calm and peaceful: the lines, worn in his rugged old face by age and dissipation, were already modified and softened under the beautifying touch of death. The smile with which he had set out to meet his Shuri seemed carved round his rigid lips, and the fine frame, stretched in its ample proportions while they searched him for papers or other clue to his identity, looked worthy of some warlike Eastern king, slain in the forefront of battle, with bow and spear in hand.

It is needless to observe that poor old Jack's pockets

had been stripped to the lining. And Lord St. Moritz was able to afford but little of the information required.

"I've seen him before," he said incautiously.

"Where?" asked the policeman, "and when did you see him last? You're not obliged to tell me, if you haven't a mind."

"In a street row," answered his lordship, turning rather red. "It's some time ago; but I haven't recovered the blow he dealt me yet."

The policeman pondered.

"He must have been a strongish chap," he murmured, scanning the fine proportions of the corpse. "I'll have to trouble you for your address, sir," he added, in a louder tone. "Your evidence will likely be wanted on the inquest."

The other handed him his card, on reading which the policeman's manner became at once less suspicious and more respectful.

"I don't expect as it will be a troublesome job, my lord," said he, with a judicial and encouraging air: "no fears, I should say, of an open werdict in this here case."

"Then you don't think there's been foul play, though his pockets are empty?"

"No, my lord, I don't. He was very powerful, was this man. You can see that for yourself. There's not many could have stood up to him when it come to blows. He'd have cut up rough, this man, if they'd a-tried it on; and I observe no marks of violence, neither about his person nor on the grass. No, my lord; I don't seem to see as this here could have been a case of foul play."

"Apoplexy, then?" suggested his lordship, who wanted to get home to breakfast.

"You know best, my lord," answered the policeman, lifting the helmet from his honest square head. "In my opinion, it's the visitation of God."

CHAPTER XLVIII

"I SAY NOTHING"

MRS. TREGARTHEN, so she loved to boast, whatever might be her shortcomings as a Christian, did her duty as a wife, keeping her husband's house in plenty, respectability, and comfort, under the best possible management. Taking charge of her own stores, much to the dissatisfaction of successive cooks, who came and went like the slides of a magic lantern, she replenished her shelves at certain stated epochs, about the period of quarter-day. Once in three months it was this good lady's practice to proceed in great pomp, by railway and subsequent fly, to the town of Boarshaven, where she made sundry purchases more useful than ornamental, lunched with keen appetite, and returned afterwards home to dinner, more dictatorial than usual, but, as she always declared, "fagged to death, and utterly worn-out."

It was held a reproach to the Reverend Silas, who accompanied her on these occasions, that he should be wholly useless and inefficient—considered by servants and tradespeople a perfect nonentity in all domestic affairs; but this seemed a little unjust, inasmuch as she repudiated his assistance, when offered, with contumely and scorn. It was a sight to see her sailing down Ship Street, a narrow thoroughfare ill adapted for the passage of such first-raters, in an impossible bonnet and gown of many colours, with glaring gloves, a striped parasol, and double gold eyeglasses—now patronising a tradesman, now bowing to an acquaintance; anon addressing a few admonitory sentences to the rector, dragging rather wearily in the rear.

Certain squalid lanes—narrow, dark, and uninviting—debouch into Ship Street; and round the corner of one who should bounce, into the very arms of his rector's wife, progressing in all her glory, but their former curate—Mervyn Strange!

It does not much signify what a man has done—

nobody can have presence of mind to cut him at such short notice as this. The rector was unaffectedly glad to see his friend; shook hands, and told him so. Mrs. Tregarthen was completely taken aback—could not but follow suit, and in five minutes the three were marching under the gateway of the old-established Bull and Boot-jack, where luncheon awaited them, as if they were the staunchest allies in the world. That this meal should be served in the apartment occupied by poor James Paravant when he carried off his gipsy bride, would have seemed a more remarkable coincidence had the hotel boasted another sitting-room. As it was, Mrs. Tregarthen set her bonnet straight, and contemplated the increasing redness of her nose in the same mirror that reflected the very different features of Beltenebrosa scarcely a year and a half ago. The rector's wife, however, was no less convinced of her good looks than of her good appetite, and took her place at table in a temper more convivial, a flow of spirits more genial than usual.

The meal, which seemed principally to consist of strong cheese, a great many glasses, and some gigantic celery, was brought in by an apple-faced parlour-maid, who, knowing the tastes of her customers, promptly, and without orders, supplied two tumblers of port-wine negus, while she placed before Mervyn Strange, after some hesitation, a modest jug of small beer.

So long as this industrious person bustled about the room, conversation was general, very general indeed—turning on the ministrations of the Church, the filthy state of the town, the inclemency of the weather, and such safe topics, carrying no personal import or allusion; but when she departed, and the negus began to act, Mrs. Tregarthen could refrain no longer: the fire burned within her, and she spoke with her lips.

"You haven't asked about any of your old friends," said she, with a meaning nod. "That's not like *you*. I never thought you were one of the out-of-sight, out-of-mind sort."

He had left off blushing long ago; he had no time for such frivolities; but he murmured something unintelligible about the rheumatics of Goody This and the gout of Farmer That, to elicit from Mrs. Tregarthen a malicious laugh.

"Is there nobody you can think of," asked the rector's wife, stirring her negus, "that you were once interested in? No young lady who put herself under your charge,

and gave you the slip at the first opportunity? You needn't kick me under the table, Silas. He has a right to know. What should you say, Mr. Strange, if I told you that Jane Lee went away to be married?"

What should he say? What had he said night after night in his prayers, but that he implored she might be happy, and he might forget her? Married, indeed! Had he not read the service of his Church over her beautiful head, with a sore and heavy heart? Married! This loyal and true gentleman knew it only too well, but he answered with as much composure as he might—

"Really, Mrs. Tregarthen! Oh, indeed!"

"Yes, married, Mr. Strange. And more than that, a widow into the bargain; but I'm sadly afraid what they call a widow bewitched! You saw poor young Paravant's death in the papers — that shocking accident, you remember, at Swansdown. We dined at Combe-Wester the very night before it happened, and who should sit at the top of the table, as bold as brass, but *your* precious Jane Lee, calling herself by some outlandish name, with all the airs and graces of a queen!"

"My dear, she did the honours remarkably well," interposed the rector. "She would have made poor James a good wife, if he had lived."

"Rubbish!" answered his lady. "Good wife, indeed! Much *you* know about good wives! You've had one for years, and never found it out. I tell you, she was his ruin. She'd have ruined a dozen such. Carriages, horses, new furniture, hothouse flowers, a French cook, and champagne running like water. It's a mercy the young man did die, in my opinion, though it's my belief she was to blame for that too!"

"But she was fond of him, was she not?" asked the curate, wondering why his heart beat while he waited for an answer.

"Fond of him? yes, and fifty others! How poor James allowed it I can't think, only none are so blind as those who won't see. Lords and what not down from London, fashionable riff-raff, and, as the marchioness herself said, the slang aristocracy. Not a respectable person amongst them, but one."

She made a mental reservation in favour of the large dandy, whom Mrs. Tregarthen felt persuaded she could have taken captive, had she been a very few years younger, and unmarried, of course.

"It was a pleasant house, too, they kept," said the rector, with a kindly remembrance of that sixty-four claret.

"Pleasant house!" repeated his wife. "Pleasant enough, no doubt; and I daresay they kept pleasant houses in the Cities of the Plain. Such waste! Such extravagance! Such vanity and vexation of spirit! I'm sure I did not feel like a Christian woman till I'd got through the lodge-gate again, going home. When I was told next day they had brought the poor young man back on a stretcher, I wasn't the least bit surprised."

"Did you learn how Mrs."—(somehow the name stuck in his throat)—"how the widow was left?" asked Strange, with kindly interest and practical good sense.

"Badly enough, I fancy; but that won't make much matter to her, from all I hear. Of course I say nothing; it's not my way to interest myself in the affairs of other people, and I haven't a particle of curiosity—never had from a girl. But I should like to know who pays for everything now; whether it's that high and mighty lord there used to be such stories about, who seemed to think his society too good for the world in general, or some of those gay young officers in the Guards, or the handsome man that talked to you, Silas, about Stonehenge. I shouldn't wonder if she got something out of them all!"

There are noble natures, besides that of the horse, inclined to press against a stab that probes them to the quick.

"Where is she now?" asked Strange, and his voice sounded so harsh that Mrs. Tregarthen looked sharply in his face, over the rim of her tumbler, while she drained it to the dregs.

"London," was her answer; "and in London she is likely to remain. If you ask me, I should say it suited her to perfection. In a country place, or even such a town as this, her goings-on could not pass unnoticed; but in London people seem to do as they like, and will, I suppose, till it rains down fire and brimstone from heaven."

The rector's wife, whose familiarity with the Scriptures placed much powerful imagery at her command, mentioned such a phenomenon as she might an ordinary shower, while she put on her goloshes and prepared to depart. The return train was punctual to time, and she had various packages to collect on her way to the station.

"You'll come over and see us at Combe-Appleton," she said, cordially enough, while shaking hands with

Strange, who attended her to the fly, walking like a man in a dream. "No, my good woman, certainly not!" she added in the same breath, shaking her head at a pale, travel-worn, miserable-looking creature, who had not asked for anything, though obviously so weak she could hardly stand. "It's my belief you're tipsy now—as tipsy as you can be; and if I see a policeman I'll tell him to take you in charge."

Then she gathered up her wraps, hurried her husband, and drove off with a good conscience in her breast, a good luncheon somewhat lower down, and a conviction that she was a good Samaritan, who had done a good day's work in a good cause.

The poor, fainting, fasting woman looked after the well-dressed, well-fed lady, as she pulled up the fly window, with a wistful, half-reproachful air, more as it seemed in sorrow than in anger.

"Drunk!" she repeated; "God forgive you, as I do! Not a bit nor sup has passed my lips since yesterday morning at daybreak. I haven't a penny in my pocket, nor a roof to my head, nor scarce a petticoat to cover me; and when you're tucked up in bed to-night I'll likely lie down on these cold stones to die!"

Mrs. Tregarthen, calling at her ironmonger's for a warming-pan under repair, was far out of earshot; but Mervyn Strange overheard the poor thing's mutterings, and partly gathered their import. Something in the woman's air and figure stirred his heart to an interest stronger than mere compassion, though it is but justice to say that had she been an Albino instead of unmistakably a gipsy, he would have turned aside to afford her relief. He never forgot the example of his Master, amongst whose manifold perfections there is but one that humanity can imitate, at an immeasurable distance, indeed, but with humble reliance on Him for assistance—the privilege of doing good. Where a man goes out of his way to pick up the fallen, feed the hungry, or console the miserable, he is, for the time being, a true disciple and loyal follower of his Lord.

"You're ill, I am afraid, my good woman," said the clergyman in a kind voice, contrasting pleasantly with the chidings of Mrs. Tregarthen. "What is it? I am afraid there is something more than hunger the matter here."

She lifted her large dark eyes to his—how they

reminded him of somebody!—and smiled feebly, while she tried to curtsey her thanks.

"I'm fasting, sir," said she; "but I doesn't feel the hunger and thirst so much. It's the chills I've got, and a pain here, all about my heart; and that's what makes me so bad."

And she leaned against the porch of the Bull and Bootjack, shaking like a leaf. In experience with his sick poor he had acquired enough medical knowledge to assure him the woman was very ill, and ought to be put to bed without delay. He had organised, since he came to Boarshaven, nobody knows at what expenditure of time, pains, and energy, a haphazard kind of hospital, into which those were taken whose only claim was that they had none elsewhere; and to this refuge he at once conducted her, leaning on his arm, through the one principal street of the town, with as matter-of-course an air as if a ragged gipsy were the fittest companion for a professional-looking divine in a long frockcoat. The inhabitants stared after him with a qualified approval that denoted there was nothing new in such vagaries.

"It's on'y payson wi' some tinker's trull," said a most unkempt dame, who seemed to persuade herself she was cleaning her house by pouring dirty water along the floor. "He've a good heart, have payson. I do know it, and so do you!"

"He be a man, be payson," replied the gentleman addressed, an amphibious person, chewing tobacco. "A man, I'se warn! take 'un how you will."

In the course of their progress his charge afforded Strange such information as she thought proper on her previous history and present prospects.

"She was a gipsy," she said, "and her name was Nance —Nance Lovel, that was her right name, and the name of her people. A gipsy born and bred, and never knew what it was to want till she married out of her kin. Yes, married a Cooper—Zachary Cooper. He wasn't a Romany, though, nor yet half a Romany, for all his gipsy name, and—there! she wished she had cut her right hand off first; but it was no use talking about that. Well, they had come west looking for work. Times was very bad, particularly in Zachary's trade. He were a tinker by rights, but he could turn his hand to almost any odd job. He liked drinking, though, more was the pity, a precious sight better than

work. He was at it now ten miles back on the road. She had been forced to come on by herself, for she was starving—it was God's truth—starving; but she could have made shift, too, if it hadn't been for the shivers and the pain that took her just before his honour came by. There it was again! She begged his honour's pardon, she couldn't hardly bear it when it came on so sharp and keen."

But they had reached their haven at last, and poor Nance was turned over to a dear, matronly, cheerful-looking woman, who treated all patients alike with the calm forbearance of indisputable superiority, from the maimed soldier six feet high, to the child in arms sickening with measles or whooping-cough.

Walking home to the dinner that must long since have got cold, Mervyn Strange was conscious, with mingled feelings of pleasure and pain dashed by some self-contempt, that he had by no means forgotten Beltenebrosa so completely as he hoped. The very mention of her name by Mrs. Tregarthen had stirred his heart to the core. That lady's account of his lost love, and charitable deductions from her manner of life, had pierced him to the quick. It taxed all his self-command to assume such a composure as might prevent even the rector, by no means an observant person, from detecting his weakness; but he despaired of having concealed it from that lynx in petticoats, the rector's wife. Just now, too, taking this poor suffering tramp to the hospital, every turn of her gipsy figure, every glance of her gipsy eyes, went through him like a knife, recalling the looks, and bearing, and gestures of the girl he had loved so wildly and so well.

"There are no demoniacs in these days," he said to himself, with the irresistible tendency of the human mind to refer anything to the supernatural that passes the bounds of its own limited comprehension, "and our Church gives us small encouragement to believe in the actual bodily presence of the powers of darkness; yet it does seem as if an evil spirit had been permitted to take the form of an angel that it might persecute me—vile, unworthy, yet most unwilling to sin against knowledge—with its haunting, engrossing, too delightful presence. Why can I not drive this woman from my memory as I have driven her out of my heart? Why must I think of her, dream of her, care for her still, when I know and am resolved that I shall never look on her face again?"

"On his very threshold"

CHAPTER XLIX

A GREAT GULF

AT his own door, on his very threshold, calm and beautiful as the angel who warned our first parents from the gates of Paradise, yet with something of expectation and humility that he had never seen before in her dear face, stood Beltenebrosa, pale and tall, in a black dress, neither demon nor spectre, but the unforgotten woman who caused all the sorrow he had yet known in life.

Was he awake or dreaming? With a strong effort he pulled himself together, as it were, and stood on his defence.

"Mr. Strange," said the well-known voice, low, impressive, and deliberate, as of old, "you are surprised to see me here—you are surprised to see me at all! Well you may be! Shall I tell you why I have come?"

What did he expect? That she should fall on his breast and declare her love at his feet and implore his forgiveness? Entreat him for shelter? Reproach him for indifference? Excuse herself for desertion? Nothing seemed improbable and extravagant, compared with her appearance here at his very door; and as no language could have conveyed his astonishment, he fell back on the most conventional of all greetings in common use.

"How do you do, Miss Lee?" said he; "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Paravant. Won't you—won't you come in out of the cold?"

She complied, marching into the house before him, with the haughty grace he remembered only too fondly, marking, we may be sure, every detail of his home—the plain furniture, the littered writing-table, the unadorned chimneypiece, no flowers, no china, no looking-glass, not even a bundle of paper-lights, nor a photograph-book under lock and key.

It mattered little to her, she thought, though with a sigh of relief; but obviously in celibacy he still possessed his soul, and there was no Mrs. Strange! If she saw his agitation, and approved, she forbore to notice it, but stood upright, resting her hand on the back of a chair in a queenish attitude of command, somewhat out of character with the part she came to play. In his preoccupation he neither took one himself nor offered her a seat. When people are nerved for a struggle they keep on their legs as long as they can.

"Mr. Strange," she began, in her fine measured accents, "I have come to you not for assistance, nor even sympathy, but for counsel. I do not beg for it as a favour; you are a minister of the gospel, and I demand it as a right."

To his honour be it said, the man was lost in the profession, even while she spoke. No physician who heals the body could have more promptly sunk his own identity in the consideration of a case, than did this follower of the Physician of souls divest himself of all earthly interests and longings, in his eagerness to fulfil the duties of his calling.

His dignity reasserted itself, his bearing became assured, his voice firm, while he answered—

"Certainly, as a right. It is my duty to hear and help and advise as best I may."

"I am very unhappy," she continued. "I need scarcely go into my past history to tell you why. My flight from the rectory was a mistake, my self-dependence was a mistake, my marriage was a mistake—my whole life has been a mistake. I know it now, when it is too late!"

If there was something pleasing to the man in this comprehensive confession of failure, no symptom of satisfaction betrayed itself on the countenance of the priest, while he remonstrated gravely.

"It is never too late," said he, "for repentance and reparation. Were you thrice your age I should remind you of those who came even at the eleventh hour. But for *you*, with the promise of a lifetime before you, how can it be too late to repent and reform, and leave the broad road for the narrow way?"

Was he thinking of Mrs. Tregarthen's malicious stories and insinuations, or did a sense of clemency for the sinner make him unusually severe upon the sin?

"Am I then so very bad?" she asked meekly enough.

"Useless, selfish, and frivolous, I know, but surely not so wicked as you seem to think!"

"I am not your judge," he answered sternly. "I can admonish, and I can reprove; but I can no more convince you of your offences than I can pardon them."

"You will believe me, at anyrate," she continued impatiently, and with feminine inconsequence, "when I tell you that I am very unhappy, and tired of everything. I have tried gaiety, I have tried adventure: the first wearied, the second disappointed me. One day seems so exactly like another. I want to lead a different life. I want to be good."

"For a change?" he asked, with some severity.

"For a change! Why not? A change for the better, surely, in such a case as mine. I have come down here to this out-of-the-way corner of the world that I might break off old associations, get rid of old habits, and begin a new life, a life of usefulness and self-denial, with nothing to hinder and drag me back."

"You have counted the cost? You mean what you say?"

"Do you not know me yet? When did I ever say more or less than I meant? Will you help me?"

He pondered. She seemed in earnest; and it was not for him, least of all in his priestly capacity, to balk her in these meritorious designs. In his experience, even at Boarshaven, he had known more than one such penitent, fascinated, so to speak, by the picturesque side of a religion that testifies itself in good works, who had fallen away sadly before the realities of the task when it was found to impose many unpleasant and irksome details. Nevertheless, she demanded a trial, and she must have it.

"You want to begin at once?" he said, marking the subdued impatience on that face he knew so well.

"To-day, if I can," she answered. "I will go amongst your poor, visit them, read to them, succour them; teach the children, comfort the afflicted, and look after the sick."

The practical part of his mind reverted instantly to his hospital.

"Have you had any experience in such matters?" he asked. "An ignorant nurse is worse than none."

"I was with poor James till he died," she answered, with tears in her eyes. "The doctor said I took to nursing as readily as if I had served my time in a hospital. Poor

James! Constant care could not save him, or he would have been alive now."

"I will not dissuade you," said the clergyman, with increased reserve. "If you really repent of a misspent life and wasted opportunities, I approve of your resolution. If you are unhappy, there is no remedy for sorrow like constant occupation in the effort to do good. I know it by myself," he added ruefully, "for I too have fallen, and suffered, and repented, and, I hope, been forgiven."

The sadness of his tone cut her to the heart. He seemed so changed, so exalted, so completely removed from her world, like some disembodied spirit purified by death. And it was her own doing! This man, now so utterly lost to her, might once have been—nay, was—her slave, and she threw him aside without a scruple. How could she? How could she? After such an outrage as she had inflicted, he would never come back again: to that she must reconcile herself as best she might. Was it because he seemed to repudiate her utterly that she felt she loved him dearly, and could not live without him? Yes, this was part of a punishment already greater than she could bear.

He was very practical when they came to practical things. Had she a respectable lodging—was it in a healthy part of the town? Boarshaven could not boast of the best sanitary arrangements, and had hardly been drained at all. He hoped to do something in time to remedy even these material defects. The fact was, you got at the moral being of people through their physical wants. His hospital, he hoped, had done as much good to souls as bodies. Would she like to begin helping him in this hospital to-morrow? —to-day? Then she was really in earnest! Well, he had taken a poor woman there (he was going to say a *gipsy* woman, but checked himself) not an hour ago. Sickening, he feared, of fever. Perhaps it would be too great a risk. If she insisted, he would go with her himself. Afterwards, he had a Mechanics' Institute to lecture, and his night-school to attend, and, in fact, every minute of his time was engaged for the rest of the evening.

So they parted—very unlike lovers, she thought bitterly —with no kind of understanding, expressed or inferred, that they were to meet again; and Beltenebrosa felt the tears rise warm to her eyes, while she wondered if it was to be so the next day, and the day after, and all the rest of their lives.

They seemed far more apart now than even on that fatal occasion when they met so unexpectedly in Boarshaven parish church, that she might leave it James Paravant's bride.

And the curate went his way, to work hard in his obscure corner of the vineyard, breaking the clods with that dogged persistency which never fails to succeed at last, and walked home in the dark, thoroughly tired out, and went to bed, and dreamed a dream.

He thought he was on a wide level plain with here and there a bush, and here and there a tree—all looming hazy and indistinct in the vapoury mist that sometimes comes at moonrise. He felt impelled, with the usual inconsistency of such visions, to glide on smooth and swift, like one who skates rather than walks, for no obvious reason, and in no defined course; but when he tried to stop, his feet seemed to bear him forward against his will. The grass grew high in places—waist-high, he believed—but he could not tell, for he skimmed along its top, which neither bent nor rustled beneath his tread. A star shone faintly through the mist that thickened every moment. He felt glad of its glimmer to direct his steps, though he knew and did not care that his wanderings were without end or aim, and all directions were alike. Suddenly, but without shock or effort, he stopped short, and found himself on the brink of a running stream, too wide to leap, too deep to wade, too swift to stem or swim. His brain turned like a wheel as he fixed his eyes on the farther bank, across the rushing waters that careered between. On that bank stood a phantom, waving, gesticulating in piteous mute appeal, imploring him to come. Its form was vague and unsubstantial, its garb, its shape, its very lineaments were dissolved in the mist; but through that floating vapour shone two large, loving, beseeching eyes, and they were the eyes of Beltenebrosa, formerly Jane Lee.

He scanned the stream that parted them, and took in its perils at a glance. No spring could cover it from bank to bank; no swimmer could make head for two strokes against that pouring torrent. The attempt must be death. But the mist grew thicker every moment; the phantom beckoned "Come!" He set his teeth, he held his breath, he braced his muscles for a leap, he put his hands together for a header—awoke in the effort, and behold, it was a dream!

CHAPTER L

THE FAITHFUL SERVANT

THIS hard-working curate, so well known to the vilest of the vile in the dirty alleys of Boarshaven, was a very different character from the Mervyn Strange of old undergraduate days, or even the assistant of an easy-going rector in a quiet parish of West Somerset. Like all men who fill a useful part in the world, he had so enlarged his views that they scarcely seemed to comprise the same objects now, and had got rid of enough prejudices to set up half a dozen young beginners in his trade. At five-and-twenty he was a priest, at five-and-thirty a parson. The distinction was of his own drawing, and to be explained thus:—

As in the different periods of historical warfare, he argued, different tactics and a different class of soldiers have been found necessary, so is it with that noblest of all campaigns, the struggle of good against evil, the conduct of which is intrusted to the Church Militant on earth. You wanted formerly a knight in armour, impervious to the weak and clumsy projectiles of his time, as you wanted a priest in his vestments, whose sacred pomp and presumptive infallibility should impose on vulgar minds, untaught to reason, assailable only by the outward senses of eye and ear. The knight in mail and plate rode down unarmoured men in battle; the priest with his awful weapons of excommunication and absolution set aside the stoutest opposition to his will with a Latin sentence and a wave of his hand: gunpowder and printing have destroyed the supremacy of both. Now that the general rate of intelligence has so increased, and the man who can neither read nor write is the exception rather than the rule, our contests, moral or physical, must be waged on corresponding principles; we must attack in a looser formation, with more self-reliance, and at the same time more mutual

support ; above all, more versatility to meet the constant changes of front and increased activity of the foe. The soldier, in these days, must be a man of science, a man of business, and even a man of the world ; the clergyman, too, requires, on the same principle, and perhaps not in a less degree than during the troubled times of the primitive Church, that wisdom of the serpent which is no unbecoming adjunct to the innocence of the dove.

"I can do more good," said Strange, "as the parson than the priest" ; and he threw aside, not without a pang, many of those ornamental vanities of his profession, which are as dear to the Cloth as his horse-furniture and trappings to the Hussar. Though he dressed in sober black, and still wore the flowing frockcoat, chiefly, I believe, because he could not afford a new one, he laid aside all those dandyisms of white cambric and black silk in which his youth had delighted. He intoned no longer through his nose, in sing-song, from the reading-desk, nor mumbled below his breath at the altar. In his sermons he insisted less on the supremacy of a Church than the brotherhood of a community, addressing his congregation with the friendly remonstrances of a transgressor like themselves, who prayed, and hoped, and tried to do better, rather than frightening weaker and irritating stronger minds by insisting on an impossible standard it seemed hopeless to attain, and of which no very tempting example was afforded in violent invective and denunciations of unreasonable wrath.

He was of opinion, too, that he could do more good by visiting his parishioners in their homes, than by reading three sermons a day to his clerk and the pew-women ; nor did he consider an incessant ringing of bells indispensable to the doctrine, discipline, and prosperity of a Christian Church.

I am not quite sure that the women thoroughly liked his discourses : to such arguments as assailed their reason they did not listen, and listening, would not have understood ; while in his eloquent appeals to their feelings they sadly missed those reiterated assurances of eternal misery for the great bulk of mankind, that seem to the gentler sex a comfort and satisfaction it is difficult to comprehend.

But for the honest, hard-handed bread-winners, the heads of families, who toiled heartily all the week, but were prone to fall into the snares of Satan and John Barleycorn on Saturday night, "payson," as they called

him, was really a guide, philosopher, and friend. He never withheld manly rebuke; he told them to their faces that they were fools to squander a day's earnings on an hour's debauch, and beasts to indulge in excess when the children wanted shoes; but he never ignored the strength of their temptations, nor refused that sympathy to such as had given way, without which human nature turns dogged and morose, sinking from bad to worse, till it becomes insensible alike to kindness and reproof.

The women also, when they came to know how courageous a temperament accompanied his unfailing kindness of heart, approved of him mightily, as seen in their own homes. They appreciated that courtesy to their sex which is the unerring mark of a gentleman, and flopped their dirty dusters over their dirty chairs with all the more cordiality of welcome that he removed his hat, the instant he crossed the lowliest threshold, as scrupulously as if he were entering the drawing-room of a duchess.

They wondered at him for the first few months, the tradespeople especially, many of whom, resenting his scanty means and narrow expenditure, insinuated that he was a humbug; but by the time his night-school had filled and his hospital was fairly started, all ranks were constrained to admit in their own extraordinary vernacular that "payson, he do be a good sort—uncommon!" And though he never expected it, even here, in the squalid alleys of Boarshaven, inhabited by the most untidy population in England, he did not miss his reward.

It is on such men as these that some angel, taking an interest in the episcopacy, pounces now and then to make a bishop. Who can tell whether they do as much good in the wider as the narrower sphere? At anyrate, they serve where they are ordered, and some day, when the secrets of all hearts are made known, who can doubt they will hear in heaven those gracious words of approval their whole lives on earth have been spent to win?

Our sailors, according to Dibdin, cherish a pleasing fancy that

> There's a sweet little cherub who sits up aloft,
> To take care of the life of poor Jack.

And it would be well if some shipmate of this friendly little guardian were told off for the same humane duty as regards a poor parson's heart.

We have never been taught that St. Anthony, though he must have sadly required it, received any visible assistance from above; and as the ideal of woman, to many temperaments, is even more formidable than her reality, he must have had a roughish time when beautiful shapes, arrayed rather than dressed for conquest, were flitting round him in swarms. The little cherub might have rendered no small aid to the saint; might render no small aid now to many a bachelor parson through the length and breadth of England, whose heart, large in every other sense, is small, like his income, in this, that it can only find room for one woman at a time.

Now that lawn-tennis has displaced croquet, and become the engrossing occupation of both sexes under five-and-thirty, at all hours of the day, how is he to escape? Every garden and pleasure-ground in his own and other parishes is filled with Houris — black-eyed, blue-eyed, grey-eyed (the last very dangerous), proffering claret-cup instead of sherbet, and waving their scarfs, green or otherwise, to the true believer, if only they can persuade him to believe in *them!* Eyes, cheeks, and lips glow with exercise and health; shapely forms take every imaginable attitude of grace and freedom in the exigencies of the game. Sweet voices laugh and coo and murmur. "Won't you be my partner?" says one. "You and I can do it easily," whispers another. "I'm so afraid of you for an adversary," smiles a third; and the undefended captive feels he could not be more helpless were he involved bodily in the meshes of that insidious net, stretched between his enslavers and himself, in a mere mockery of prohibition. Yes, next to a picnic, especially in wet weather, which may be termed a certainty, I think a garden-party to play lawn-tennis is, of all the fields in which man meets his fair enemy so clumsily, the most likely to ensure his discomfiture and defeat.

Now there were young ladies even at Boarshaven; there were lawns and gardens within easy distance of the town; need I say there were rackets, balls, chalked-out courts, and lovely players, ready to take every advantage of the game? Yet in less than six months one and all had given up Mervyn Strange for a bad job. The man seemed adamant. He was stiff, they told one another (that was when each had given him up for everybody else); he was pompous; he was a bear! Papa liked to have him, because

he thought him so useful in the parish, but even when papa invited him one couldn't get him to come. He was odd, certainly. Good-looking? Oh, dear no! What about age? Oh, a hundred! Why, the man's hair was quite grey. They had asked him to dinner, wanting to be civil, which wasn't absolutely necessary, for, after all, you know, they never asked the other curate; but he refused, and even mamma said it was no use.

Presently they left off chasing him, wistful and ashamed, one after another, like a pack of fox-hounds that have been running hare, and the opinion of every young lady within the Boarshaven circuit of that walking postman who so deplored Valentine's Day was that Mr. Strange might be honest, well-meaning, intellectual, and a pains-taking clergyman; but, individually, one could not quite like him, because he had no heart!

How little they knew! And that heart, which they voted he did not possess, had been aching for months in a loneliness that he now looked back to as comparative comfort and repose. He was sad then, and dull enough in spirits, but at least he had the approval of his own conscience, and a sense of self-reliance that waits on steady perseverance in the path of rectitude and common sense. Now he was haunted! Yes, haunted—no other word could express the delusion under which he laboured, the spell against which he fought. Not in vain! No; he was resolved it should not be in vain. As a man puts from him the promptings of an evil spirit, or resists in some hideous dream the invitations of a fiend, so would he strive against the influence this woman had come here to regain, and resolve, if necessary, though they should live in the same town, nay, in the same street, never to set eyes on her fatal beauty again.

"Could you not have left me in peace?" he groaned, waking up from those dreams, sleeping or waking, that always recalled the same pale, proud, handsome face. "What had I done to you that you should persecute and torment me for ever? You have robbed me of all my happiness in this world. Take it and welcome! but you shall not rob me of all my hope for the next!"

CHAPTER LI

GOOD WORKS

BELTENEBROSA, I need hardly observe at this stage of my narrative, was not a person who did things by halves. In less than a week she settled herself as the occupant of a decent first floor in the cleanest house she could find, to the intense bewilderment of a landlady who had never seen anything to compare with this lodger before, and talked about her from morning to night. She organised a regular routine of duties amongst the poor, especially those who were sick, and took stated hours of attendance at the hospital, where the matron, who at first sadly mistrusted her fine appearance and white hands, declared she was as good as any two paid nurses for helpfulness, as she called it, and had better nerve than most surgeons. She was never tired of enlarging on the merits of her paragon to Mervyn Strange, who listened with unbroken patience, though usually inclined to cut her volubility rather short, for this energetic functionary, like many other trustworthy and invaluable women, loved to hear the music of her own tongue. It seemed unaccountable, however, and even uncourteous, that he studiously avoided visiting his favourite institution at the same hours as Mrs. Paravant.

"I'd like you to see her," said the matron, delighted to get a listener, "walking through my wards and passages, smooth and noiseless as a shadow. If they're asleep, not one of them wakes when she passes by. If they're hot and restless, tossing and turning, poor things, she don't go to aggravate them, mincing, and sidling, and whispering: worse than if you were to beat a drum in their ears, as I know well, being used to sick people and their ways. Her very clothes, though they look so fresh and new, don't seem to rasp and rustle not half as bad as my own; and many's the time, if you'll believe me, Mr. Strange, I damp

a clean petticoat to take the starch out, till it's as limp as a rag."

"You consider her an efficient nurse?" asked the clergyman, waiving further details of the good lady's toilet.

"It's no word for her," was the enthusiastic answer. "If nurses came straight down from heaven, she could hold her own with the best. I needn't remind you, Mr. Strange—a clergyman—and a *good* clergyman, too—of what comes out of the mouth of babes and suchlike, after they're weaned, of course. Our little Jem Vialls—that mite of a thing in number two, with his poor little thigh broke, you know—well, I looked in to see if he was asleep, yesterday about this time, and I found the dear laughing to his little self, as pleased as Punch. 'What is it, Jem?' says I; 'leg doesn't hurt so bad now?' says I. 'Oh, mother,' says Jem—he always calls me mother, poor innocent, having none of his own—'what do you think?' says he; 'I was dreaming of the angels in heaven, and I woke up so quick, there was one of them left that hadn't time to fly away. She tucked me up and kissed me, and she's to come again every day till I get well. Do you suppose, mother,' says he, 'she'll take me with her when she goes back for good?' Then I knew, as if I'd seen her, that Mrs. Paravant had been nursing the boy; and if she's not exactly an angel now, she will have wings of her own some day, or I'm very much mistaken."

How could he listen to such trash? He was ten minutes behindhand already, yet he lingered curiously, loath to go.

"That fever case?" he asked—"the gipsy who came in last week. Is there any hope she will recover?"

"There's every hope!" answered the matron. "But here again, Mr. Strange, I tell you fair, it's not the doctor that has pulled her through, but the nurse. He says so himself. He told Mrs. Paravant the same. 'I'm only the medicine,' says he, with his old-fashioned bow. 'You, ma'am, are the food and the fresh air, and the blessed sunshine into the bargain. I showed the patient the way upstairs, I admit, but it's you, ma'am, you, who took her up under the arms, and hoisted her, step by step, to the first landing. I congratulate you, ma'am,' says he, 'and some day you'll get your reward.' I never saw our doctor take so much snuff, Mr. Strange, since I've known him;

that showed he meant all he said! 'Ah! you give me a hundred such nurses as Mrs. Paravant, and I'll undertake to clear every hospital this side Severn by next Easter Day!' But you can't find 'em, Mr. Strange, you can't find 'em, and that's the truth!"

He was the last man to dispute it. Must it be always so? Was it not enough that she should haunt his thoughts and his dreams? Must he also hear her praises on every tongue? find witnesses to her merits at every turn? It was a hard battle, much harder than he expected. His weaker nature longed to lay down its arms, ask for quarter, and confess itself beat; but that weaker nature, kept under control from boyhood, should not dictate to him now.

"Will you walk through the fever ward, sir?" asked the matron, with that sudden relapse into official gravity common to her class, as to warders, inspectors of police, and non-commissioned officers in the army. "It's a chance if we don't find Mrs. Paravant there now. I should like for you to see her at work; she's so quiet, and helpful, and earnest. Grave and thoughtful, too. Just like yourself, sir. I often think she's not quite easy in her mind; but I wouldn't take the liberty of asking her. I dursn't, Mr. Strange, to tell the truth, and that's a good deal for me to confess."

No; he wouldn't visit the fever ward just then; he was pressed for time. He would come back later, when there was nobody to disturb the patient, if she would like him to read to her. The last time she seemed too unwell to listen.

The matron smiled. "We can't undertake to cure her so far as *that*, sir," she answered. "You may read the Bible to these gipsies till you're hoarse, and never a word will they understand from end to end, and wouldn't if they could. It's bred in them, Mr. Strange; they can't help it. Vagabond, heathen, savage is the gipsy from birth. Like the wolves, if you take them home and tame them, they're as wild and fierce as ever again the day they get loose. Bodies they have tough as pin-wire, and constitutions splendid! It's a pleasure to nurse them; but as for souls! in my opinion, Mr. Strange, they haven't got any, though I beg your pardon, sir—you know best."

Neglecting to set her right on a question in which she must be so egregiously mistaken, the curate departed without further parley, and Beltenebrosa, who knew his

step amongst a thousand, felt her heart tighten and the tears come to her eyes, that he should thus avoid her with deliberate and heartless coldness, here in the fever ward of his hospital, as in the streets of the town or the few mild social gatherings in which there seemed the slightest chance they would meet.

It was impossible for a woman like Mrs. Paravant to remain unnoticed even in so quiet a place as Boarshaven. Mervyn Strange was not the only clergyman in the place, and the routine of her self-imposed duties brought her in contact with the other curate, an honest young fellow, who admired beauty and loved cricket; also with the rector, a grave divine nearly superannuated. Both these Churchmen, though they thought him a little mad, highly esteemed their coadjutor, and were willing to receive with cordial civility this wonderful nurse of his importation. The elder, indeed, thought it would be as well if she were not quite so good-looking; but the younger seemed of a different opinion. Both, however, expressed and showed a desire to make her stay amongst them as agreeable as they could. The rector's wife also, too advanced in years to be prejudiced against the beauty she professed to admire, pronounced at once that this dark, handsome person was a lady born. She knew the stamp, she hoped, and could not be mistaken, for her mamma's own brother was a baronet (*Vide* Burke's *Titles Extinct*), and she had herself been presented at Court.

So Mrs. Paravant was asked to a quiet afternoon tea, and came; and being put through her facings, was made to confess she was a Paravant of Combe-Wester, to find herself vastly increased in importance by the admission, as belonging to one of the county families of a neighbouring shire. In her own short apprenticeship, while she kept house for Forward James, she had been obliged to study that inexplicable table of precedence for which there are no written rules; and acknowledged, though she could not understand, the superiority a marsh on Severn-side conferred over a block of houses in Boarshaven town. The rector's wife exulted. "There was no mistaking the old blood," she said, "nor deceiving those who possessed it. She knew the woman for a lady at a glance."

And Beltenebrosa lingered over her lukewarm tea, and watched and waited, glancing at the door, and he never came.

It was the same thing day after day. That desire which feeds on disappointment, is of all the most engrossing, the most demoralising, and the hardest to subdue. Sometimes she caught sight of his well-known figure hurrying round a corner, and felt her heart sink with the consciousness that it vanished purposely on her approach. Sometimes, meeting him in his rounds, he would turn deliberately before they were face to face, and walk away in an opposite direction. Once they came into collision—there was no other word for it—in a dark and squalid hovel, where an old crone lay dying: he spoke firmly and coldly, without the slightest symptom of emotion, on the necessities of the case; and she answered in the same tone. Would all her senses have thrilled with rapture to know that under this unflinching assumption of self-command, his heart was beating more wildly and aching more cruelly than her own?

In her vexation and despair she sometimes thought of that last resource by which a woman tries to recover a lost empire at the sacrifice, often fruitless, of her own dignity and self-respect.

"Shall I make him jealous?" said she, and despised herself for the suggestion. There was plenty of material to her hand: the other curate, an aspiring solicitor given to good works, two or three young gentlemen learning to raise rents and shoot wild partridges, at a neighbouring land-agent's, one and all would have waited no second hint to fall at her feet; but something in the pride of her wild nature, some innate sense of fidelity to herself, rather than another, forbade the degradation, and she let them sigh in vain. Beltenebrosa was "going through the mill," so to speak—was being subjected to that course of training which strengthens, purifies, and exalts the moral being, even as discipline and sudorifics dissolve humours in the physical frame. She had the good sense to know it, telling herself, in all humility, that she was suffering for past unworthiness, and it was only right that one whose life had formerly centred solely in self should be punished by the *peine forte et dure* of discovering that her whole existence was merged in another.

Some dispositions, under continued disappointment, sink into apathy and despair; not so with hers: no woman with those mobile features and flashing eyes could shrug her shoulders, fold her hands, and say "What's the

use?" Evil or good, she must be doing. It seemed fortunate that at such a juncture the good lay nearer to her hand than the evil, and, what is of more importance, nearer also to her heart. In walking these long rounds, the very physical exercise was beneficial; and who can dwell entirely on mental sufferings, however acute, in presence of bodily agony crying out for relief? That she was treading in the curate's very steps, that she passed through the doors he had lately closed, hung over the bed at which even now he stood, beautiful in the brightness of those who bring good tidings; that she shared his dangers, as his toils; tending the same contagious disorders, breathing the same fever-laden air; that she might come across him by accident at any moment, on the field where they both fought so gallantly; all this she tried hard not to consider, forcing herself to accept the situation for its own sake, whatever might be the result. Here was the lesson of humility she must learn. Here was the task of reparation she must fulfil. She would go through with it to the end.

CHAPTER LII

BORN A LOVEL

TO use an expression of the matron more forcible than elegant, poor Nance "had a squeak for it." Low fever, fastening on a frame wasted by hard living and hard usage, found little to oppose its ravages, save the innate strength of constitution that seems the birthright of a people who live and die in the open air. To the spare habit and vigorous temperament of her nation, combined with the patient nursing of Beltenebrosa, Nance owed a recovery that for a time seemed hopeless; for she remained some days insensible, regaining consciousness at the stated period that Nature seems to have established as her landmark, a point where the doctor is satisfied he has saved the patient and worsted the disease. When, after a long unbroken sleep succeeding many hours of delirium, Nance opened her black eyes, they expressed in their first glance the cunning and caution of her race. Beltenebrosa knew she was recognised, even before the poor thin hand on the counterpane clung round her own, and raised it to the pale wasted face with a touching gesture of gratitude and devotion.

"Is it you that's been nursin' of me, sister?" said Nance, in the trembling accents of exhaustion, "or am I dreaming still? If so be I am a-dreaming, don't ye wake me, for pity's sake! Let me go off comfortable; I'll never feel so easy again."

"It *is* Jane Lee," answered the other. "The same Jane Lee you waited on in the patron's caravan. You're not going to die, Nance; never fear. Keep quiet now; go to sleep again. I won't leave you; I'll be at your bedside when you wake."

She had anticipated this untoward recognition by her gipsy kinswoman, and prepared herself for all its hazards and inconveniences; yet were these none the more accept-

able when they came. She dreaded the discovery of her refuge by Jericho, his exactions, his audacious advances, his reckless cupidity, and — and — what would Mervyn Strange think of her intimacy with such people as these?

She need not have distressed herself. Gratitude is one of the few good qualities that the ban of society has not succeeded in eradicating from the gipsy's character. Nance felt and declared she owed her life to the patient assiduities of her nurse, and cherished, moreover, an active sympathy for this stately kinswoman, who, like herself, had married out of her race.

In the long hours of convalescence she would dwell, with no little interest, on their similarity of fortune, envying, I am inclined to think, the good luck of the other in losing a Gentile husband she ought never to have won. No princess of old Spain, no Austrian countess with her sixteen quarterings, no Percy, Howard, Seymour, or Somerset of our own nobility, could have laid greater store by the transmission of pure blood from generation to generation, than did this gipsy tramp, with her ragged petticoat, shapely figure, slender hands, arched feet, and dirty, high-bred face.

"I can't think how I come to do it, sister," she argued; "and if I wasn't regular bewitched, I'm sure I couldn't have been in my right mind. Born a Lovel, as you know, nothing can't rob me of that; and to take up with one of them Coopers, and him not a *real* Cooper neither! It doesn't seem like sense, and yet it's true—too true, as I feel every day, to my cost!"

"But I suppose you liked him?" observed the nurse, wondering, with some self-scorn, that she, of all people, should take an interest in a love-story. Had she not done with such follies for ever? Had she not gathered the flowers to find only poison in their petals? And could she hanker after the scent of them still?

"That's just where it is," answered Nance. "How was I to be off liking of him—so pleasant-spoken, so obliging? 'Let me fill the pail for you, my dear,' says he; 'those beautiful slender fingers of yourn oughtn't never to know the touch of hard work. You'll come to the fair with me, my dark-eyed Nance, and if there's aught good enough to set off that comely face of yourn, I'll spend a week's wages but what I'll have it!' Now it's 'Blast ye! why isn't the kettle a-bilin' for my grog? There you be, as usual,

washin' of your face and combin' of your hair, when you ought to be mindin' your work!' And as for black eyes, sister, I've an extra pair as doesn't set off a woman's good looks, oftener than not, along of his cruel fists. He've a heavy hand, have my Zachary, and, though he be but a little chap, bless ye! he's as strong as a bull."

"I should leave him, dear, if I were you," exclaimed Beltenebrosa, firing with womanly indignation at this recital of conjugal wrongs. "I wouldn't live a day with a man who dared to lift his hand against me. Not an hour!"

"It's easy talking," answered Nance wearily, "but what's a poor woman to do? We can't keep ourselves not anything like decent with the little wage our weak fingers can earn at the needle and suchlike. I doesn't think as I could wire a rabbit, even a young one, not if I was starving! We wants a *man* about us, whether or no. Somehow the fire doesn't seem to burn so bright when there's no master a-lightin' of his pipe at the embers; and it's dreary work to wake up at night under the stars and find yourself all alone. No, sister; mine is bad as can be, I'm not going to deny it, and yet a bad husband is a sight better than none at all."

"But you came here alone," urged Beltenebrosa. "The matron told me that when you were brought in by —by—Mr. Strange, the day you were taken so ill, he found you in the street without a soul to look after you."

"It's God's truth, my dear," was the answer; "and God's blessing on that tall grand gentleman who picked me out of the very mud in the roadway. He's fit to be a prince, he is! *There's* a man, now, as a woman might be proud and happy to own! He'd never speak a word but in kindness; he'd never look at her without a smile; and he'd lay down his life for her, if need be, just because he is one of the brave, loving sort as thinks her a finer creature than himself, when she isn't fit to clean his boots! I seen it in his eyes!"

She had thought so too, of late, a thousand times. Did his admirable qualities strike her more forcibly now that they seemed so obvious even to this rude, uneducated kinswoman, who had detected his noble nature with the intuition of her sex? Beltenebrosa did not often blush. Nevertheless, she turned aside to the window, and changed the subject.

"What shall you do, Nance," she asked, "when you are obliged to leave us? You know we mustn't keep you after you get well."

Nance pondered.

"Go back to Zachary," she said resolutely: "maybe he misses me by now. My Zachary isn't always at his worst, sister. Sometimes it will be fair weather with him days on end. He was on the drink, you see, when him and me parted; but that wouldn't last more nor a week at most, 'specially as he wasn't over-flush of cash, and he's not one as potmen and suchlikes will trust when they doesn't know him, nor, for that matter, when they does. I wouldn't like him to be calling out 'Nance, Nance!' and nobody answer, just as he's down in one of them fits when the liquor has died out and the trembles begins. If you'd seen him then, sister, you'd pity him, you would!"

"Not so much as I pity you," thought the other; but she marvelled at this tenacity of affection for an unworthy object under its most unworthy conditions, speculating on the origin of such fidelity in one of her own kindred, the tameless race so strong for good and evil. Could she herself show this constancy, this devotion, this unchanging loyalty to the idol, however unworthy, she had enshrined in her heart? Yes! a thousand times yes!

In the meantime certain expressions, certain turns of face and gestures in her charge, brought Jericho forcibly to her memory, and she resolved to learn all she could of her persecutor's movements, on the principle that forewarned is forearmed.

"You shall not go away penniless, Nance," said she. "I will see to that; and—and—there is your kinsman, you know—yours and mine—Jericho Lee. I suppose he would take care you did not starve."

Weak as she was, Nance sat up in bed, crossed her forefingers, and moved her lips as though she spat over them on the floor.

"My curse on him!" said she, in such a hoarse whisper as betrayed the fervency of her hatred. "My curse on Jericho Lee, his tent and his blanket, his kettle and his cup! By wood and stream, by night and day, walking, lying, standing, sitting, asleep or awake, alive or dead, I ban every bone in his body, every hair on his head, that not an inch of him may go uncursed to the grave! And if

ever I forgive him, may all the ill I wish him, and ten times more, come upon me instead!

"Listen, sister! I am a gipsy, and I have taken a tinker tramp. I was born a Lovel, and I married out of my kindred and out of my degree. It's bad enough, but I might have been a happy woman only for Jericho. He it was who encouraged my Zachary to love the drink, and lent him money, the false-hearted villain! and made him work it out choring and thieving, till he got him in his hands so, as if Jerry do but lift a finger, he's bound to do his bidding like a dog! I've known him boast—I heard him myself; ah! he didn't think as I'd crept behind the screen—that he'd as good as got a rope round my man's neck, and could hang him at a week's notice whenever he took the fancy. No, sister, there's good and bad of all sorts, but nobody will make me believe as that there Devil the tall gentleman mentioned at this very bedside could ever be half so black, or a quarter so wicked, as Jericho Lee!"

"And where is he now?" asked the other, with more anxiety than she would have cared to admit.

"Where's the wind as blows north to-day, and south to-morrow, and east or west, just as it happens, the day after? I can't say where Jericho *is*, sister. I can tell you where I hope he's *not*, and that's where I seen him last, barely two days' walk from this town, on the London road, drinking with my man, giving of him a trifle of money and a heap of fair words. I knowed he was up to mischief by that, 'specially as he seemed all on the high ropes, jawin' and smilin', with a tall hat and a broadcloth coat, dressed out like a lord of the land."

"But, Nance," urged Beltenebrosa, "you must know, you must have heard him say what made him leave London? Did he mean to come on here?"

"I might find out from my Zachary," replied Nance, who could not but observe the anxiety of her listener. "As soon as I can get on my feet I'll travel back the way I came, on the track as my man is pretty sure to follow up. He'll maybe tell me if he knows; but there, Jerry's as deep as a well. Only one thing makes me think as he may be coming to this very town. I was by when he swore, black as night, he had never heard of the place, and didn't believe in it!"

The inference seemed obvious. Beltenebrosa fairly

shuddered when she reflected on the odious persistency of this man, to avoid whom she had fled into the remotest corner of the kingdom. She could neither baffle nor control him. For a moment she felt very helpless and forlorn. Then she bethought her of Fighting Jack, his paternal affection, the stronger for inebriety, his dogged fidelity to his own warped notions of right, and the protection afforded by his influence and personal daring.

"But how came Jericho to be alone?" she asked. "Where is the patron?"

"The tall gentleman must tell you that," answered Nance, with a sad smile. "He says he knows. I don't. If the patron is alive anywheres, it's in some place where he'll have to do without drink and 'baccy. Clothes, too; but he won't miss them so bad. Why, didn't you never hear, sister? The patron has got a grave in London town, just like some Gorgio gentleman as dies in a four-post bed. I wouldn't say but what there's a stone to it, and print. I hope he lies easy, I'm sure, for he'll never get out no more!"

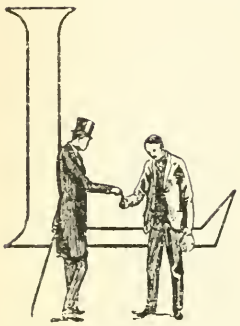
"Is he dead?" gasped the other.

"Dead enough," answered Nance. "Sudden like, they said. Went under as if he'd been shot. We was in the north, Zachary and me, when the news come. I can't mind what the doctor called it, but Jericho says it was gin."

Beltenebrosa fairly broke down. "God help me!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears, "I haven't a friend in the world!"

CHAPTER LIII

NOLENS-VOLENS



LORD ST. MORITZ, in spite of the policeman's anticipations, was obliged to attend an inquest held on the body of Fighting Jack. His own, indeed, seemed the only material evidence, and the whole affair, transacted in a close, ill-ventilated apartment, occupied very little time. Emerging with some satisfaction into the fresh air, his lordship was surprised to feel his elbow touched by a slim, dark fellow with the gipsy colouring, that still, by some association of ideas, brought sweet and bitter memories into his heart.

"Can I have a word with you in private, my lord?" said this person, who was none other than Jericho Lee.

His lordship had never been deficient in courage. Scanning the slender proportions of his questioner, he decided that in the event of a struggle he might hold his own well enough, and with little hesitation followed the other into a by-street, where they could converse without interruption. After proceeding a few paces, the nobleman came to a halt.

"Now, then," he said abruptly; "what is it? You want money, of course."

"I don't look like it," answered Jerry, glancing down at his own flash attire. "But your lordship knows what's what as well as most, and I do want money, that's the truth. I'm not asking you to *give* it me. My lord, I can tell you something for a fiver that you would part with a hundred willingly to know."

"Say a crown," replied his lordship coolly, suspecting this must be some racing tout with false intelligence about

a trial or a breakdown. "Five shillings, and I'll take my chance of your secret not being worth five farthings."

"You won't say that when you know what it is," returned Jerry. "Look here, my lord: five sovereigns, or even four, money down, and I'll tell you where to find somebody that's been as good as lost for weeks past."

Though his heart made a great jump, that steady face betrayed no kind of emotion.

"Nonsense, my good fellow," said he. "Do you think your information is better than mine? Come, if you're hard up, I'll say a pound; take it or leave it."

"I'll have to leave it, my lord. It's not half enough. Four quid, here on the nail; that's the lowest price."

"Then you can leave it, my man, and walk on. Here, I'll give you a cigar for nothing, if you want to smoke."

"Your lordship is a real gentleman. I should like to oblige you. Won't your lordship spring a trifle?"

"Not a shilling. I'm very hard at a bargain."

"Well, have it your own way. Thank you, my lord, and I'll take the cigar too, if you please. She's at Boarshaven, that's where she is. I want the money bad, or you wouldn't have got the tip so cheap."

It was true enough. Like many others who live by their wits rather than their wisdom, Jericho Lee, notwithstanding the fine clothes on his back, was almost penniless. It requires uninterrupted success in shoplifting, picking pockets, and such branches of unregistered industry, to stand the expenses incurred by a fancy man of the swell mob like handsome Jericho Lee. The champagne alone swallowed by his fair friends, at ten shillings a bottle in the Haymarket, made a fearful hole in his earnings; and after he had treated one to gloves, another to boots, and a third to a new hat, there was little left for himself. This sovereign, so opportunely extracted, would pay his expenses to Boarshaven, whither he resolved to follow his kinswoman, taking a West-country fair on his way, at which merry-making he hoped to earn some addition to his resources, by help of that useful implement the thimble, that homely vegetable the pea.

It was thus he came in contact with Zachary and Nance, to the deterioration of the tinker, and extreme discomfiture of his ill-used spouse.

"Boarshaven!" muttered his lordship, as he walked away. "Now, what in the name of everything that's

unaccountable can have taken her to such an out-of-the-way hole as that? The fellow seemed to know all about it. I wish I had asked him a few more questions. I believe he is a relation; something in his face reminded me of hers. I wish it had not! I've never done any good with her from first to last, and that night after the play was a sickener. I don't suppose she would speak to me now, if we met again. I've half a mind to try. There's some mystery about her I would give the world to find out. She is in with all sorts of people, even such a scamp as this, and yet she has the manners of a duchess and the bearing of a queen. Perhaps if I knew her real history I could master her. I never was beat by a woman yet. Shall I start for Boarshaven this evening, ferret it all out, and have one more try? I believe it's the dullest place in England, with the dirtiest hotel. Let me see, though: I am engaged to dinner to-day and to-morrow. Then there's Mrs. Stripwell—I promised to take her to the Alexandra Park: to be sure I could throw *her* over. Next week I might manage it; but it's a long journey, and suppose she should be gone when I get there! Besides, one *is* a gentleman, and it does seem bad form to hunt a woman down. It's unfair—hang it! unmanly! I've heard of some Eastern fellow—the Lord Mayor, Prester John, somebody—who had a remembrancer, a wise man, to go out walking with him, and remind him of everything he ought not to have forgotten. I've a great mind to set up something of the kind, a fellow who would tell me what to do when I can't settle for myself. Now, this is a case in point—I want to go, and I don't want to go. I'd give a hundred to see her again, and a thousand never to have seen her at all. She has upset all my arrangements, demolished all my schemes, and, in a roundabout way, impaired even my health. She has vexed, baffled, and defeated me at every turn, and yet I am hankering after her like a schoolboy. Is it because she puzzles me, or why? I never was sure of her; never could quite make out whether she liked me or not. No; I won't go near her. I'll leave off being a fool. I'll give it all up; have a final row with Mrs. Stripwell, and retire from the business. After all, I believe women are a mistake! I see fellows get on very well without them. Look at Beauregard, the handsomest man in London now, and has been for the last twenty years; I don't believe he ever *looks* at a woman,

except his hideous old wife, and he don't trouble her more than he can help. How happy he always seems! how contented! Dine with you, drive with you, shoot with you, go anywhere, do anything. Now, whenever I run off one engagement, I am obliged to pay forfeit on another. Somebody has to be thrown over, and then there's a blow-up. Words always; tears sometimes. Hang it—I'm sick of the whole thing!"

Wise resolutions enough, but for such a temperament, and after such a life, exceedingly difficult to carry out. Habit is second nature; and his lordship could no more forego the excitement of flirtation than a Highlander his dram or a Dutchman his pipe. Some men are fools about women in early manhood, others in advanced age; but Lord St. Moritz had been alternately their slave and tyrant his whole life through, and perhaps in the immunity that comes with constant danger, had taken less harm than might have been expected, till he met Beltenebrosa.

That he regarded her with feelings more like real attachment than those he entertained for any of his other loves, may be inferred from the indecision he now felt as to his movements, and his dread of her scorn when he should appear in his true colours. For a moment he almost made up his mind to ask her to marry him point-blank; but he knew himself well enough to be sure that her very consent would make him cease to desire it; whereas a refusal—and he had every reason to expect one—could only render him more devotedly and uncomfortably attached to her than before.

There are deep meanings in the old myths of Greece, invented by sages who sifted human nature to the husks. No glances are so eager as those cast on fruit hanging one hand's-breadth out of reach; no thirst is so burning as that which waters lips, but never slakes. Tantalus, close under the heavy-laden boughs, up to his neck in a running stream, must have been an object of pity to gods and men!

Lord St. Moritz, alas! was never satisfied to drink from his own cistern, and inherited so much of his character from our common mother that, having access to all the trees in the garden, he was sure to long, like Eve, for that which bore the forbidden fruit! All the way home, through the rattle of a hansom cab, his good and evil angels argued the point. It was hard to give her up; it was cruel to

hunt her down. No gentleman should persist in his advances to a woman when he sees they are unwelcome; but again, she admires perseverance, as she appreciates fidelity, and a breach incessantly battered must become practicable at last. Scores of proverbs, contradicting each other, were summoned to strengthen opposite sides of the argument. "If she will, she will, you may depend on't; and if she won't, she *won't*, and there's an end on't!" seemed a doggerel replete with wisdom, till he reflected that "constant dropping wears away a stone," and that the Scotch, a wise and cautious nation, protest "nineteen nay-says make half a grant."

He was in a state of extreme vacillation and uncertainty about an expedition to Boarshaven; but perhaps, altogether, only wanted an excuse to go.

When he reached his own house, he found it on the hall-table, in the shape of a letter from a great lady, who has not appeared personally in these pages, but of whom I have taken the liberty to make mention, under her title of marchioness. From his lordship's valet, who did not fail to peruse this communication when he took his master's coat down to brush, I gather its contents were as follows:—

"DEAR LORD ST. MORITZ,—I know how wedded you are to London, and that you find great difficulty in tearing yourself away from its *many* attractions; but I venture to hope we can persuade you to pay us a little visit next week, the 20th or 21st, just as it suits, and we trust you will stay as long as you feel the country air does you good. There is nothing else to offer. Shooting is over; the hunting, I fancy, *atrocious*; and, thank Heaven! we have no neighbours. There will be a Function at Boarshaven, a place you never heard of, but our nearest town, where we are very great people indeed: a sort of tea for the school-children, romps, and prizes, and a parson to do the polite. You know the kind of thing, and need not go if it bores you. *We* must, as it is rather a stronghold of Ned's voters, and one has to keep up the family interest. I was in hopes the ballot would have spared one all these worries, but nothing seems to make any difference. An election costs as much money, and everybody drinks as much beer, as in the good old times. I haven't heard a word of scandal for six weeks, and positively *thirst* for news, so mind you bring down a fresh budget.

"If you come, as I *hope* you will, Stoke-Erith is our station; it is close to the North Lodge, and we will send for you, of course. If anybody asks after me, say I'm not dead yet, only *buried*, and believe me, dear Lord St. Moritz, yours very sincerely, ROSE ERITH.

"*P.S.*—Tilbury bids me tell you he has some *dry* champagne he wants you to taste. I think it *very* nasty!"

The valet wondered why she should still call her old marquis by his second title, more particularly as her own marriage took place nearly twenty years after his father's

death. Lord St. Moritz, who was accustomed to such confusion of nomenclature, sat promptly down to write a joyful acceptance, specifying his day and the train that would bring him, promising, moreover, all the stray morsels of scandal he could glean, while regretting the crop of evil was unusually scanty. So unnatural a state of things could not last, he thought. Nothing really shocking had taken place for two months. An explosion must surely be due, and no doubt it would come off before he left town next week.

CHAPTER LIV

HUNTED

THE bloodhounds were on her track, and though Beltenebrosa was no timid hind, to give up all hope of resistance when she ceased to find safety in flight, she had yet lost much of the self-confidence that used to support her in earlier years; she was beginning to desire security and repose—something to trust, something to lean on, something to love. The bare idea that Jericho was following her up seemed so distasteful, she almost resolved to leave England for the Continent, and, taking with her the recommendations to which she felt justly entitled, enter on a fresh career of usefulness and good works, under another name, in a foreign country, where she might hope to remain unmolested and unknown.

That Lord St. Moritz should have joined in the chase was a turn of worse luck than she could have anticipated. It needed a painful effort of self-command to retain her calm bearing and characteristic dignity when she came face to face with him, of all places on earth, in Boarshaven infant-school, cleared out and arranged for a tea-party of little people, with ruddy cheeks and wistful eyes, to be made happy in a surfeit of cake, toffee, and buns.

It was the merest chance that she found herself there at all, having by no means intended to assist at any festive gathering in her deep mourning and confirmed despondency; but the schoolmistress had been taken ill at the last moment; the matron, who had promised to assume a divided command, was sadly at a loss for a colleague, and, knowing they could both be spared from the hospital, now nearly empty, entreated Mrs. Paravant to come forward and stand in the gap.

"It would be very hard lines for Mr. Strange," she argued, "if all his arrangements should fall through at the last moment; he set such store by these little folks, and

loved to see them enjoy themselves. She had heard him say many a time that it was his one chance of holiday-making in the whole year."

This seemed a good reason, no doubt, but I am not satisfied it would have ensured compliance had Beltenebrosa known she was to meet the marchioness and some fine friends, amongst them Lord St. Moritz, at so homely a treat. She naturally concluded the party would consist of a hundred small tea-drinkers, the matron of the hospital herself, and Mervyn Strange. She saw him so seldom now, it would be a joy to hear him speak, to breathe the same air, in the same room, and attend to the same duties. He would surely not refuse to exchange a few words on their mutual occupations, and she might even take that opportunity of asking him in what way she had given him offence, so low had her pride fallen! What did it matter now? What did anything matter? She must make up her mind to go away, and never see him again. So she sleeked her black locks even more carefully than usual, put on a clean collar and cuffs, looked at her own beautiful face in the glass, with a satisfaction of which sorrow itself could not deprive her, and took up a position behind an enormous tea-urn at the end of a table twenty feet long, prepared for any eventuality, except, perhaps, that which actually arrived.

The examination was over. It had, indeed, to be ignominiously curtailed, wanting its usual leader. These students of tender years could not be expected to answer questions put in a stranger's voice; and the curate, who was fond of his little charges, soon saw the necessity of letting them down easy in the matter of simple arithmetic, short spelling, with history, natural, sacred, and profane. So the little people clapped their hands to a certain chorus repeated at intervals to keep them awake during school-hours, and sang a hymn, approved, doubtless, by the angels in heaven, but quite unintelligible to mortals on earth.

The spectators, delighted to get off with so short a programme, voted the whole institution "charming," reflecting the highest credit on the management, the clergyman, and above all the patroness, Lady Erith, who never came near it but on such occasions, once a year!

She entered the tearoom with her party, at the head of a column nearly one hundred strong, and literally gasped in astonishment to see Mrs. Paravant superintend-

ing an array of metal teapots and stacks of bread and butter two feet high.

"Good gracious, my dear!" exclaimed her ladyship, when she recovered her breath, "I say again, emphatically, *good gracious!* What is this? What does it mean? Are you doing it for a bet?"

The other, taking Lady Erith's proffered hand, dropped a mocking little curtsey.

"You cannot be more surprised than I am," said she; "I never expected we should meet here. But your ladyship is on duty, I conclude, and I am not."

"Duty?" repeated the other. "Wait till I collect my scattered intellects. Duty? Yes, I suppose I am. It has been anything but pleasure, my dear, till I saw you. Now let us attend to business. Where are you staying? and when are you coming to us?"

The procession had been brought to a dead-lock in the sudden stoppage of its leader: the children gazed at this tall, handsome lady, who seemed so intimate with that absolute divinity, the marchioness, with open-mouthed admiration. The bystanders looked on, wondering, awe-struck, and certain of the townspeople, who knew Mrs. Paravant as the mysterious sick-nurse, began to think they had "entertained an angel unawares."

Only Mervyn Strange cast restless glances at those two striking figures in juxtaposition over the tea-table, and marvelled why he had not yet reconciled himself to the conviction that Beltenebrosa and he moved in spheres wide as the poles apart. It might have been for his especial behoof she avowed her intentions to Lady Erith so decidedly and in so audible a voice.

"I have been here some weeks," said she; "but of course," glancing at her black sleeve, "I could go nowhere. Now I am packing up to start again. It is a great piece of good luck to have caught this glimpse of you at the last moment."

"You can't possibly go without paying us a visit at Stoke-Erith," insisted her ladyship. "Tilbury would tear his grey hair. He raves about you still. My dear, you shall be as quiet as you like. We have nobody with us—at least, nobody that *counts*—except Lord St. Moritz, and you know him so well. Here he is!"

She moved aside to make way for his lordship, who advanced with extended hand, but an undecided expression of face.

"You haven't forgotten me, I hope, Mrs. Paravant," said he. "It is not so very long since we met."

"I have *not* forgotten Lord St. Moritz," she answered, in tones of icy displeasure, utterly ignoring his attempt at a cordial greeting, "nor do I wish to be reminded of him." And she turned to her teacups with an air of superiority and dignified displeasure that crushed him to the earth.

"He looked like a fool," said Lady Erith subsequently, relating this passage of arms to her kind old husband. "It was as good as a play. You never saw anything so well done. Our friend, as we all know, is not easily set down, but she fairly walked over him, and I don't think he has recovered it yet."

To tell the truth, Lord St. Moritz for once in his life lost his head, and accepted the false position in which he had placed himself with as little tact as a schoolboy. In private combat there are many ways of conducting a hand-to-hand engagement with a lady. Some men affect a cool superiority they by no means feel; some rave and storm more furiously than the enemy, silencing her, as it were, by a better-sustained fire than her own; some again —and these, I have been told, are more successful than might be supposed—burst into tears, with unusual demonstrations of emotion, and by a timely appeal to her clemency, conquer even in the moment of submission; but when she declares war in public a man should lay down his arms on the spot. He is fighting with his hands tied; the sympathies of the crowd are against him; he has not a chance, and the sooner he gets off the field the better—pell-mell, right-about-face, and run for your lives! All this nobody knew better than Lord St. Moritz, yet was he so ill-advised in his vexation as to hover round Beltenebrosa, among her cups and saucers, persistently endeavouring to attract her attention and engage her in conversation, however commonplace, on the homely duties of her task. Here, however, he met with his match. Nothing he could do or say had the slightest effect in breaking through her haughty reserve, and if compelled to accept his assistance, in such matters as the removal of trays or replenishment of milk-cans, she took no more notice of her coadjutor than of the domestic articles he held in his hands.

"She treats me like a footman," thought his lordship, "and I believe I like her none the worse! It won't last, of course. She couldn't be so savage if she didn't care for

me a little. To-morrow there will be a reaction, and I shall sail in triumphantly on the turn of the tide!"

But here, trusting, perhaps over-confidently, to a practical knowledge of the sex, his lordship was grossly in error. There is no such fallacy as to determine the conduct of any one woman in a particular case by some general law considered applicable to the whole sex.

What says the Preacher, the wisest of men, and unusually experienced—if we are to believe history—in such matters? "One man among a thousand have I found, but a woman among those have I not found!" meaning, I take it, that in the former sex only could some clue be afforded, by study of the many, to the character of one. To judge by his writings, women must have puzzled the royal sage exceedingly. The more he knew of them, the lower they seem to have fallen in his opinion; but perhaps, in an extensive polygamy, he may have undervalued all because he never became thoroughly acquainted with a single individual, and fell into the vulgar error of trying to account, on known principles, for anything they professed to do, or did, or did *not!*

Lord St. Moritz, who resembled Solomon in this one respect alone, bore his disgrace as best he might—very badly indeed; made himself troublesome, made himself obnoxious, nay, made himself ridiculous—worst and most fatal mistake of all!

Few of us can have failed to remark an instinct of the female sex, like that of small birds in presence of a hawk, which impels them to make common cause, on certain established occasions, against the common foe. Dislikes, rivalries, even jealousies, are forgotten. They stand by their colours with an *esprit de corps* and a loyalty that defy attack. When thus massed, as it were, to "resist cavalry," in which manœuvre they are not always singly so successful, the enemy hovers round these fair Amazons to no purpose, retiring at last, in disorder and disgust, from the unequal fight.

Lady Erith, with feminine acuteness, detected her friend's intention of pouring discomfiture on the offending head of Lord St. Moritz, and helped her to the utmost. Even when the feast was over and the cake eaten, when rosy little mouths had been wiped, chubby little hands joined in such simple thanksgiving as flies up through the air like a rocket, and the room cleared for a

distribution of prizes, to be succeeded by romps and sugar-plums, she placed Mrs. Paravant next herself, in a corner by the wall, and so hemmed her in that common good breeding forbade the most persistent of tormentors to exchange a word with her, good or bad.

"I must make the most of you while I've got you," whispered her ladyship. "But do tell me, dear, in confidence, of course, what on earth is the meaning of it all?"

In a few hurried sentences Beltenebrosa gave the most plausible account of herself she could evolve at such short notice. She had lost her husband, as Lady Erith knew, under very painful circumstances. Her whole life had been altered, and, indeed, darkened, by this bereavement. She had been staying in London, but London was the loneliest place in the world for a *femme seule*, and—yes, she was sure she had been less unhappy even here at Boarshaven. Lady Erith couldn't understand that. It was not to be expected. But happiness had very little to do with places. For her part, she had given up trying for it. If she could do a little good in the world, that was all she asked. It did not much matter *where*. She had made up her mind to go abroad, because—because—she liked the hours, the climate agreed with her, and England reminded her too much of the past.

"Nonsense, my dear!" said the marchioness; "you are hipped, bored, out of health; you want tonics, gaiety, cheering up. I wish you would see my doctor; such a quiz, but so clever! Depend upon it, my dear, you are ill."

"Not ill," answered the other sadly, "only unhappy."

The tears rose to her fine eyes, but Lady Erith could think of no better medicine for the mind diseased than her own panacea.

"We would soon put you to rights at Stoke-Erith," said she, rising to break up the ceremony. "Change of air, change of people, change of scene. Come to-morrow," with a glance at Lord St. Moritz; "he's not going till the day after."

But his unexpected presence at this festival, combined with the dreaded arrival of Jericho Lee, had decided the intentions of Mrs. Paravant. Lady Erith knew by the pressure of her friend's hand when they parted that she meant a long farewell, and, attributing this contrariety in some measure to his lordship, was less cordial with him than usual during the whole journey home.

CHAPTER LV

MISJUDGED

A WOUNDED spirit seems endowed with some *clairvoyance* of its own. It sees through the eyes of the heart, at any distance and in any light, much that does exist, and also much that does not.

A good-natured clergyman, fond of children, superintending the wants of an infant-school at high festival of tea and cake, might be supposed to have his hands so full that he could spare little observation for matters, however engrossing, unconnected with the filling of urns, emptying of plates, and ministering to the appetites of the happy, hungry little people over whose meal he presides. Yet did Mervyn Strange, attending to all these details with his usual energy, detect—through his skull, no doubt, and the back buttons of his coat—certain grave offences in the woman he loved, that had no existence but in his own imagination.

It mattered little to him, he told himself, except, of course, as challenging reproof from one of his sacred calling, but it was evident that this former lover had followed her here, expressly to renew the attachment that existed, to their shame, during her husband's life. Had not Mrs. Tregarthen told him all about it in this very town? and Mrs. Tregarthen, with many faults and much love of tittle-tattle, was a shrewd, observant, far-seeing woman of the world. He was not inclined to believe a word at first, so prejudiced had he been—and no wonder—in favour of an offender whose beauty precluded his impartial verdict, but he must believe his own eyes—or rather the eyes in his waist-buttons—now! They were flirting! Yes, that was the word used by designing men and unprincipled women to express the insidious advances of temptation—flirting egregiously, even here, in the presence of these children, whose innocent little faces should have shamed them into the pretence if not the practice of decency and virtue.

And what was he, this man—this Lord St. Moritz, on whom the policy of our British Constitution conferred hereditary distinction as a legislator of his country? Had he any earthly merit or good quality whatever, save a reputation for that spurious wit which is more properly called insolence, and those trivial accomplishments that, as they seldom accompany sterling worth, are rather to be deplored than envied or admired? God forbid he should judge harshly! but Charity herself must not ignore truth; and that is wilful blindness, amounting to complicity, which ignores the wolf when he wears his sheep's clothing avowedly in jest.

It was no affair of his, he could not repeat too often; but he had made inquiries concerning this nobleman, and had received much the same answer from all. His character seemed well known to be utterly devoid of principle where women were concerned. Society held up its hands in comic deprecation, and declared, upon its word, he was too bad! His conversation was agreeable enough — *Voyez-vous? C'était son métier* — but his morals were really beyond toleration, and his attentions to any lady, married or single, simply meant destruction to her fair fame.

This was the profligate whom Beltenebrosa had selected, doubtless from amongst many others, for an intimate friend —nay, a favoured admirer—before her husband's death; and now, when the poor fellow was scarcely cold in his grave, here he stood in compromising attendance on the widow, with his silver tongue, his silken manners, and his front of brass. It was shameful, sinful, outrageous—and he blamed her even more than her lover. How should a woman be so lost to all sense of decency and self-respect? As a member of a Christian community, he could not sufficiently condemn her conduct. As a minister of a Christian Church, he doubted but that it was his duty to protest against it aloud.

What a position would have been his own at this moment, had he not resolved long ago to tear out of his heart this folly that had so nearly conquered him! It seemed providential that he should have so schooled and prepared himself for his present trial. If happiness were gone for ever, at least duty and honour remained. Why, oh why, were these so inadequate to fill the void in his aching breast?

He knew, but would not admit, that never in his life

had he felt so miserable as when he returned to his lonely lodgings from the infant-school; but a manly nature only hardens under affliction, and the more he suffered the firmer grew his determination neither to bend, nor quail, nor cry out, nor yield an inch!

Lady Erith, too, was much exercised in mind concerning her handsome friend. Considering how little they had seen of each other—perhaps for that very reason—the marchioness had contracted a marvellous affection for this mysterious woman with the dark eyes and the foreign name. She was really pleased to meet her again, concerned to observe that she seemed unhappy, and much vexed that she failed to secure her company for a friendly visit at so dull a season of the year.

Lady Erith, quoting one of the most popular wits of the day, was wont to observe, with a comical mockery of his impressive articulation, that she could "Resist anything except temptation, and bear everything except disappointment." To the last-named trial her ladyship was exceedingly sensitive; and connecting, as I have already observed, her failure in securing the company of Beltenebrosa with the proceedings of Lord St. Moritz, was barely civil to the nobleman the whole way home.

Her depression lasted all through dinner. "Tilbury," as she called the marquis, doing the affable for two stupendous dowagers, on either hand, bobbed his venerable head to shoot anxious glances at his young wife, along a table laid for eighteen, studded with hothouse plants, cups, vases, and gold plate. The old butler, who had taken her into special favour from the day she entered her new home a blooming bride, came round with his "Champagne, my lady?" (out of her turn) in vain. Not till she had swallowed a cup of strong tea in the drawing-room was her equanimity restored, and with it arrived a rush of curiosity that she resolved, at any sacrifice, to indulge.

When the gentlemen came in, she had so arranged her party that the billiard-room was empty. As Lord St. Moritz put down his coffee-cup she challenged him to a game, and walked him off for an uninterrupted interview, during which, to use her ladyship's own expression, she meant "to turn him inside-out like a glove."

"I'll take spot," said she, "and you shall give me ten. We'll string to begin."

Then she chalked her cue, and made an egregious miss.

"I thought our little love-feast went off very well to-day," observed this diplomatist. "I was immensely astonished to see Mrs. Paravant there, weren't you?"

Looking him through and through with her keen bright eyes, she detected something of insincerity and confusion in his own.

"I'm too old for the sensation," answered his lordship, sprawling across the table to make a cannon. "At my time of life, I may be disgusted, but I can't be surprised."

"Disgusted! What a word! If you ask me, I thought she looked disgusted, not you."

"How did *I* look?"

"Defeated, baffled, put to shame, all over the place. Confess, now, Lord St. Moritz, you came down here on purpose to meet her, and it's no use."

"How can I confess anything so rude? I came here because you asked me, because it's the pleasantest country house in England, because your infant-school is a hundred strong. I'm *so* fond of babies!"

"Nonsense, Lord St. Moritz! she's a friend of mine, and I think you're using her ill."

"How, Lady Erith?"

"You know better than I can tell you. Have you not flirted with her ever since she appeared in society? have you not got her talked about, and to a certain extent compromised by your attentions? and now that her husband is dead and both are free, you have no right to turn round and leave her out in the cold."

"The other way up, if you please, Lady Erith. Short of boxing one's ears, she could not have snubbed me more heartily than she did to-day."

Lady Erith burst out laughing.

"I admit the snub," said she, pocketing the red, which left her nothing to play for: "I never saw a more complete set-down; but it's your own fault, and it serves you right! Now listen, Lord St. Moritz. I asked her to come here before you went away, and she refused. That's nothing. I shouldn't mind going for her myself to-morrow, and carrying her off by main force, only—mind! if you don't mean fairly by her, and settle it all before you leave this house, I'll never speak to you again, there! It's your turn to play."

Placing the red ball on the spot, he had time to consider

the situation. His lordship did not at all fancy being taken possession of in so high-handed a fashion, and this eagerness on the part of his hostess to see him married was exceedingly unflattering, as arguing not on her own account the slightest partiality for him.

"I am obliged to go away to-morrow, my dear Lady Erith," said he. "It is most unfortunate, but I had a telegram this afternoon, requiring me back in town. I have had such a pleasant visit, and only regret it could not be longer. But you'll ask me again, won't you?"

"That depends. I daresay Tilbury will. Do you mean to marry my black friend, and become a respectable man?"

"Don't you think I'm nicer as I am?"

There was something so absurdly cool and imperturbable in the rejoinder that she could not help laughing, though intensely provoked; and his lordship played the game out, feeling that once more the collar had been nearly slipped over his head, but he had escaped.

"Depend upon it, Rosie," said the marquis, when in the sanctity of her dressing-room she related this encounter to the kind old husband, whose experience of the world and its ways had sharpened his faculties, but by no means hardened his heart, "you had better have let it alone. St. Moritz knows what he is about, and it's possible he may not consider your handsome favourite, whom I think charming myself, so fit to be a wife as you do. He has had great opportunities of judging, you must remember."

"That's exactly what I say. It's the very reason I want him to do her justice."

"No doubt, my dear," was the placid reply; "but you cannot expect *him* to see it quite from the same point of view."

So Beltenebrosa not only fell in the good opinion of the man she loved, but also lost her friends' support, through the events of the day; and yet how could she have conducted herself with more womanly reserve, more propriety of conduct, from first to last?

As no man's character, however unblemished, is high enough to escape calumny, so no woman can hope to go through the world uninjured by the malice of her enemies, but more especially uncondemned by the verdict of her friends.

It is so easy to blame; so easy and so pleasant withal,

inferring a nice discrimination, an exalted standard, and a conscious moral superiority. People who have never handled a brush, steered a ship, or set a squadron in the field, have no hesitation in laying down the law on the defects of a portrait and the incompetency of a hero by land or sea. Those whose hearts are mere organs of animal economy, that have never ached with sorrow nor swelled with sentiment, sit in judgment, usually damnatory, on the poor sufferer, whose tortures have proved unbearable only because of the sensitive, generous disposition they wrong so cruelly. Everybody sees the beam in his neighbour's eye, nobody puts himself in his neighbour's place.

"She loves him with a criminal attachment," argued Mervyn Strange. "They understand each other, and that affected coolness in public is to deceive the world."

"I suppose I ought to drop her," pondered Lady Erith. "I'm not censorious, and she's *a dear*; but one must draw the line somewhere, and from Lord St. Moritz's manner I am half afraid there is something wrong."

CHAPTER LVI

STRANGERS YET

I DO not conceive that in those mental sufferings, which seem the very conditions, more or less severe, of a soul's training for immortality, any torture can be greater than that which racks two loving hearts, yearning to come together, but separated by a gulf known only to themselves, purely imaginary, yet none the less impassable and profound. The chains that bind them are invisible and impalpable as those of the nightmare, when she ties us hand and foot, paralysing every sensation but that of fear. The moment of waking no doubt sweeps them away, as a morning breeze sweeps its film from the meadow; but no dreamer can rouse *himself*, and it needs a friendly hand, often rudely applied, to bring him back to the regions of reality and common sense.

There was no kindly go-between to reconcile Beltenebrosa and Mervyn Strange. No impartial counsellor to tell them what fools they were, and how, from a sense of false pride and fancied injury, they threw to the winds that chance of happiness which is said to come for each of us once in a lifetime, and no more.

They dwelt in adjoining streets, less than a hundred yards apart. They met ten times a day. On occasion they could not avoid exchanging ceremonious greetings, even a few commonplace words. Great heavens! It is enough to drive a man mad, that he must propound platitudes about the weather, telling the woman he loves "it is a fine day," when he longs to fall at her feet and never get up again till she takes him to her breast! And for her—do you suppose she does not suffer too? though with more outward calmness and a better grace, as looking forward presently in her own chamber to the relief of tears —a solace denied to the stronger sex.

Beltenebrosa, perhaps from her wilder nature, seemed

more impatient of sorrow than the curate, and decided, with characteristic impetuosity, that she would bear it no longer. There were other places in the world besides Boarshaven, which was, moreover, no secure refuge now. She must leave it without delay, and so, at a bold stroke, put an end to this suspense and misery, once for all.

She would have gone without wishing Strange good-bye—so she told herself—had it not been that a recommendation in his own hand, testifying to her efficiency as a nurse, might be advantageous to her future career. After all, she argued, she had done nothing to be ashamed of. Though he chose to avoid her so cruelly, there was no earthly reason why they ought not to meet. And it would be something to take with her into banishment: the last word, the last look of the man she loved so dearly.

Yes, she did not try to conceal it from herself. The impression made by Mervyn Strange on her girlhood, at first so slight that she sacrificed him without a scruple, had deepened, day by day and week by week, as she advanced to maturity, till at last in the prime of her womanhood—none the less because it seemed he could never be her own—she had established him as the ideal of her intellect, the chosen of her heart.

Only a woman can understand how she must have loved him, to hoard away the amount of her debt, and keep it in reserve, that she might pay him at any moment, hesitating to do so only because it seemed to constitute a community of interest, and she could not bear to sever this the last link between them with her own hand. So the day after the school-feast, Beltenebrosa prepared herself by a careful toilet for the final interview she was resolved to extort. All her appliances of dress and decoration were well chosen, we may be sure; and though mourning affords no great scope for indulgence of the fancy, there are many little coquetries of costume exceedingly fascinating in black. If we may be pardoned a bad pun, weeds will sometimes do your business quite as effectually as flowers.

I am firmly persuaded that no true woman would neglect to set her bonnet straight if her head were going to be cut off the next minute. And this regard to externals is, in my opinion, one of the most valuable qualities of the sex. What would they be without vanity? What *are* they in the privacy of domestic life, when

familiarity has bred conjugal contempt, and the wife, careless of her husband's admiration, sinks into a slattern, while she sours to a shrew? No! vanity in a good-looking woman is one of her greatest charms, and in an ugly one, if such exist, what is it but a healthy corrective and reminder—the leaven that leavens the whole lump?

Exceedingly brave at a distance, and confident in her armour of proof, Beltenebrosa felt her heart sink woefully while she approached the curate's home. It spared her some embarrassment, and perhaps a sharp conflict with her own self-respect, to meet him in the street, walking sadly along, and scanning the pavement with an air of unusual dejection. A moment's consideration she felt would put her to flight in disorder; so, dashing forward with the courage of despair, she got into line, as it were, and charged forthwith.

"Good-bye, Mr. Strange," said she, advancing on him with a slender, black-gloved hand held out. "I was coming to say it in your own house, but it will do as well here. I'm going away on Monday morning early. Good-bye!"

Why should he care? Why should the simple conventional farewell sound in his ear like a knell for the dead? Going away! Of course she was. To Stoke-Erith; to the marchioness and her fashionable friends; to Lord St. Moritz and his detestable attentions. He expected as much, just as he might have expected the shock of a shower-bath when he pulled the string; but it took his breath away all the same!

"Good-bye, Mrs. Paravant," he rejoined stiffly enough, accepting, rather than taking, the offered hand. "Make my compliments, if you please, to the marchioness. I have written to thank her for kindly attending yesterday; but perhaps you will say I shall take an early opportunity of paying my respects at Stoke-Erith?"

His heart was going like a sledge-hammer, but his accents were measured, even precise. A woman not in love with him would have said, "This man is pompous, and a prig!"

"Stoke-Erith!" she repeated. "I am not going near Stoke-Erith. Do you think I should trouble you to say good-bye for a mere drive like that? No, Mr. Strange. I mean to cross the Channel on Monday night, and—and I hope it won't be very rough."

There was something pitiful though ludicrous in the

last sentence that roused his tenderest sympathies, but, with a moment's reflection, the sterner nature reasserted itself. She was going, of course, to meet Lord St. Moritz at Paris, that easy capital where it is supposed people "can do as they like," though I believe there is no greater social fallacy than this persuasion, even if they could make up their minds what they did like.

"I have forgotten most of my French," said he indifferently, "but I remember enough to say *bon voyage!*"

The wounded spirit would have cried aloud, but for the bitter indignation that "when we are wroth with those we love" acts like a styptic on a wound, and though it forces tears out of the heart, keeps them back from the eyes. She only answered in a low, mournful voice—

"You can do something for me before I go."

Why could he not tell her the truth, and state honestly that if she had asked him to cut his throat, then and there, for her amusement, he would only have been too delighted to oblige? Why cannot people say what they think, and be no less outspoken in their love than their hate? Perhaps, in destroying much uncertainty, such candour would ruin the romance of the whole thing. We should have no sighs to record, no dreams, no drawbacks, no disappointments; and to write a three-volume novel would be simply impossible.

The curate bowed austerely enough, and waited for information.

"I require a written recommendation from you, Mr. Strange," continued Beltenebrosa, in rather haughty accents, and with her head up, "countersigned, if you please, by the matron of your hospital, setting forth my capabilities as a nurse. You cannot refuse to do me this justice, nor, I hope, would you wish to hinder me on the path I have chosen for myself."

While he pictured her in a foreign country, friendless, alone, ministering in fever wards or pestilent *faubourgs*, he had much ado to refrain from a scene in the public streets; but the hated image of Lord St. Moritz came to his assistance, and arguing that these weaker sentiments were part of the temptation he was bound to resist, he gained the mastery with a strong effort, but determined to prolong the contest no further. Lifting his hat with scrupulous courtesy, he observed, "I will send it round to you this evening," walked gravely into the house, and shut the door.

He never invited her to enter. He had not so much as asked her to sit down, thought Beltenebrosa, and it was obviously his intention to avoid her even now, on this the last occasion they would be together on earth. Perhaps it was better so, she said to herself with somewhat bitter resignation. It made her task lighter, her duty less irksome. In proof how much easier it seemed to leave him, she buried her face in her handkerchief the instant she was round the corner, and sobbed as if her heart would break. The tears would only have flowed more freely, perhaps, could she have seen the man she loved wrestling with his agony in the privacy of his own study, praying to be delivered from temptation on his bended knees.

CHAPTER LVII

LATE FOR CHURCH

THERE is no feeling of anger more self-sustaining than that which the Latin poet calls *spretæ injuria formæ*. But it takes divers shapes. It goaded Dido to self-destruction, and I fear that in these modern days it has driven many a poor girl in a ragged petticoat to jump from the parapet of Waterloo Bridge. Amongst ladies of fashion, happily, it seldom gains such mastery as to induce these desperate expedients. A beauty in good society, flouted by one lover, generally revenges herself *on* herself, in a far pleasanter manner, by taking another.

Some, indeed, do not even wait for this excuse; and we are all acquainted with charming people, friends, no doubt, of Mrs. Stripwell, who change their admirers less often, perhaps, than their dresses, but more often than their doctors; these seem to have established an excellent rule for female immunity. They never allow the man to tire first; and of such versatile mistresses, though it speaks little for his good sense, the man seldom tires at all!

Alas for Beltenebrosa! that, with those outward graces of the fashionable world she learned so readily, her force of character and keen temperament forbade her to acquire such hardness of heart as affords a woman the only real armour of proof when she goes down to battle with the world. Seeing her move through a drawing-room with the carriage and bearing of a queen, who would have suspected the strong, unbridled feelings that tore her heart beneath that proud exterior, or detected the wild, sensitive gipsy nature under the finished manner and assumed indifference of a fine lady before the world?

It is positively awful to reflect on the contrast between people as they seem, and people as they are! There is,

perhaps, no such disillusion as to meet an actress off the stage. She disappoints you—and it is saying a great deal —even more than a theatre by daylight; but what in her is the disuse of rouge, whiting, and stage decoration, compared to the abandonment of that conventional propriety which every woman wears habitually in presence of her nearest and dearest, as of society in general; but, attacked by sorrow, sickness, or strong excitement, takes off in the privacy of her own chamber, when she puts on a dressing-gown, and lets down her back hair?

It is wonderful to reflect, literally and metaphysically, how very much the best of us are made up of clothes, after all!

"Scrape the Russian," said Napoleon, "and you come to the Tartar." Even so, inside her silks and cambrics, nay, under the very coating of enamel that plates a haughty dame of modern fashion, beats a heart as fond, reckless, and unreasonable as ever impelled to crime the squaw in her wigwam, or the gipsy in her tent. She can love blindly as a savage, and, I imagine, if crossed or flouted, you need not scrape very deep to find in her also something of the Tartar.

Beltenebrosa, cast off by the man she loved, was a prey to mingled feelings of vexation, disappointment, and wounded pride. Had she not been going away she might have held her own well enough, returning scorn for scorn, and assuming an indifference no less unreal, while far better acted, than his own. But even as imaginary grievances and commonplace differences vanish in the presence of death, so she found no room in her heart for any feeling but deep sorrow and contrition in the prospect of a parting that she told herself was to wither and destroy for ever her hopes, her future, all the bloom and promise of her youth. Winter seemed to have come before she had done with spring, and night to have overtaken her in the very flush of day.

It was a miserable Sunday. Boarshaven had been too well provided with bells, from a full and complete peal at St. Bede's to a little cracked monitor that summoned half a dozen cobblers and an insane baker to hear each other discourse by turns in a meeting-house called the Ichabod. These were all set jangling at once. Beltenebrosa, packing up with a heavy heart, was fain to stop her ears that she might exclude the jarring sounds, each of which seemed to

beat like a hammer on her brain. At breakfast—such a mockery of a breakfast!—an envelope arrived containing the recommendation she had asked for. No letter; not even a simple little note. She shook the cover out over and over again—only two lines at the edge: "With good wishes and prayers for your welfare.—M. S."

She never looked at the document. She leaned her head on her hands, and knew that she suffered and tried to be strong. It would have been the longest day she ever spent, but that she grudged every passing moment as hurrying her nearer to her doom, and though each seemed to bring with it a fresh pang, yet the dusk of evening arrived all too soon.

Her resolution gave way. She would see him again—not speak to him, of course, but look in his face once more, and hear his voice. She had not been to church all day. She would go to evening service at St. Bede's, where he was to preach a charity sermon on behalf of his favourite hospital. She would sit in a dark corner, far away from the pulpit, and watch and listen, and try to think of heaven —not *him!*

It was strange how she looked forward to this inadequate consolation. What store she set by it! How it seemed to postpone her departure, and put to-morrow much farther off. So she started in good time, when it had been dark about an hour, for she meant to be early, so as not to lose one of the moments that were now so precious and slipped away so fast.

At her own door she met Nance, completely recovered in body, but obviously much distressed in mind. A policeman would have judged such strong emotion in one so shabbily dressed the result of inebriety; but Beltenebrosa knew her gipsy kinswoman better, and even in that dim lamplight could distinguish the quick, restless glance of terror from the vague uncertainty of drink.

"I must speak to you, sister," whispered Nance, whose face was deadly pale, while her black hair hung down to her waist. "Not here, not here! He'll knife me, as sure as you're born! Come into the dark—up yonder, beyond the market-place!"

The woman seemed almost frightened out of her wits. Her words came thick and hoarse. She wiped her clammy forehead, and the slender dirty hand she laid on the arm of her listener shook like a leaf.

"Who will knife you?" asked Beltenebrosa, not without uncomfortable misgivings, for of all disorders fear is the most contagious: "not Jericho? Have you seen him?"

"Speak low," muttered the other, in shaking accents. "He's one of those as can hear plain at a mile off. No, not Jericho—though he wouldn't think twice about it if he knowed where I was now—it's my Zachary, as swears if ever I was to split on him he'd swing for me, he would! And he'll not go back from his word. We're safe enough in this out-of-the-way corner, but we must speak low, sister, even here!"

They had entered a dark, ill-conditioned street, without a single lamp, of which a few hovels rather than houses, and the dead wall of a brewery, formed the sides. Any windows that looked on it were shuttered. Not a footfall was to be heard. They could not have been more alone on the top of a mountain.

"It's you that must do it!" whispered Nance excitedly. "There's nobody else in the world as can. It's a rough job, but he's got to be told, sister, and by you!"

"He! Who?"

"Why, that there long parson—the best gentleman on God's earth, I don't care who the other is! The man as lifted me up out of this very dirt here beneath our feet, and took as much care of me—Gipsy Nance—as if it had been the daintiest lady in the land. Ay! and he'd come to my bedside while I was down in the fever, and speak good words, such as I didn't think it was in the tongue of a man to get out. I'm a sight more used to banning and cursing, you know, at home. What do you think, sister? He told me my life were as precious, and my soul—for he said he was sure as I'd got one—ay, precious as even the Queen's on her throne, and had cost as much, too, though I didn't clearly make out why. And am I to let that there angel be put upon, and ill-used, robbed, and maybe murdered?—yes, *murdered*, sister!—for my Zachary sticks at nothing, nor Jericho neither, once their knives are out. Not if I knows it! I wish the hair may fall from my head, and the teeth drop out of my mouth, and my hands rot off at the wrists first!"

She seemed to gather courage in talking, and Beltenebrosa, who suspected danger to her idol, felt no

more fear for herself now than a lioness defending her whelps.

"Steady, Nance!" she said, in a low, firm voice, laying her hand on the other's arm. "What am I to do? Tell me all you know."

"What you've got to do is to warn of him. *Now*, sister, this very night as he goes home from church," replied Nance. "Oh! it's a good plant enough, but they little thought as I'd come in and gone upstairs, and heard every word, putting my ear against the floor. Bless ye, sister, I'm that quick of ear, I can almost hear the snow fall! I slipped out again afore my Zachary came up, and he don't guess as I'm down to him no more than the dead. Well, they laid of it out between them, and if it had been any other man alive I wouldn't have moved a finger, good or bad; for business, you know, is business, when all's said and done. What is a Gorgio, more or less, to such as you and me? But this one! No! That's why I come here, sister, as fast as my legs could carry me; 'For,' says I, 'Jane Lee can save him,' says I, 'and Jane Lee *will* save him, for poor Nance's sake.'"

"It makes little matter for whose sake," said Beltenebrosa. "Done it must be, and that without loss of time. Steady, Nance; once more, tell me, as short as you can, what you heard of their plans. Take your own time, but not more than you can help."

Then Nance entered on a confused and rambling statement, from which Beltenebrosa, whose courage and presence of mind rose to the occasion, extracted the following facts, by a judicious cross-examination, conducted with patience deserving the highest praise.

It appeared that Jericho and Zachary, who had lately arrived at Boarshaven, having spent all their substance in drink, and being now thoroughly habituated to crime, missed no opportunity of supplying themselves with the funds they required by petty larceny, burglary, or even robbery with violence when the prospective booty was sufficiently tempting. Pending the black-mail they intended to levy from their kinswoman, into whose presence Jericho, mindful of matrimonial views, did not care to enter till he could make a more splendid appearance, these worthies hit upon a plan that seemed to promise lucrative returns, at the slight risk of an encounter, two to one, with an unarmed man.

They ascertained that Mervyn Strange was to preach on this very Sunday evening one of those sermons of which the eloquence is to be gauged by the collection. His oratory—"gab" they called it—was known to be of a persuasive nature, and the contributions of his congregation would probably amount to several pounds. He would carry it all with him to his lodgings, preparatory to defraying certain expenses and paying the balance into a county bank next day. Their information as to these details was professionally correct, and they had studied every inch of the ground he would traverse between the church-door and his own home.

In a dark, narrow passage called Crone's Alley it would be easy enough to surprise and overpower him. Strong knuckles pressed into his neck under the ears would stifle any outcry; and if he did show fight, being, though slight, a lengthy, muscular man, why, a push with the knife made less noise and was neater practice than all the vulgar bludgeons and thumpings in the world.

If he wore a watch, they promised each other not to take it; the money they would have, because gold and silver could not be traced. Nothing else; not even his sermon, Jericho protested, with grim facetiousness. They would leave him his bread-winner to get more.

"Why didn't you go to the police?" asked Beltenebrosa; for such formidable disclosures seemed more adapted to the ear of a vigilant inspector than a young woman proceeding quietly to evening church.

"Police!" repeated Nance scornfully; "and been run in, maybe on a charge of drunkenness, to be locked up till it was all over; and then dragged before the beak to swear away my Zachary's life, or his liberty, at best—'cause I doesn't suppose as they'd let him count for a regular husband, not by law—help him to the hulks, maybe, or the House of Correction; starve for want while he is in, and likely get my throat cut when he comes out! No, no, sister; I've done all I dare—told you all I know. You may take it or leave it: I won't meddle nor make with it no more!"

They separated while she spoke, hurrying off in opposite directions, and Beltenebrosa found herself in a few minutes at the door of St. Bede's, causing some little stir and observation by her late entrance. He was safe enough for the present, at anyrate—tall and stately between the

lamps, in his white surplice, reading with impressive gravity the portion of Scripture appointed for the evening lesson. She heard not a syllable: she was thinking of the touching parable that describes how a certain wayfarer fell among thieves.

CHAPTER LVIII

"MARTHA"

WAS it counted to her for sin that she could not fix her attention on the prayers of our beautiful Liturgy, nor draw from its soothing phrases that consolation which it seems to afford the most restless and preoccupied of worshippers? We humbly hope not. If, like Martha, she seemed so cumbered with terrestrial matters that she had no thought to spare for heavenly things, hers at least was an emergency that made such negligence pardonable: as when a poor dumb creature falls into a pit, and man extricates it in common humanity on the Sabbath Day.

Once, during the anthem, she felt her spirit rise for a few brief moments, on the floating notes, into those realms of eternal peace—that promised land, longed for, now and again, by the most worldly of us, "where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest"; but when the peal of the organ died away, she came down to earth again, and the welfare of Christendom, the approval of angels, the kingdom of heaven itself, seemed as nothing, compared with the one life that was at stake to-night. She tried to fix her thoughts, she tried to repent of her sins, she tried hard to pray, but her mute petition, such as it was, went up in ceaseless iteration "Save him! save him! If a sacrifice be required, make *me* the victim, and let him go free!"

Like a thorough woman, she had acted on impulse rather than reflection, flying to guard her beloved with the instinct that causes a hen to ruffle round her brood. It would have been wiser, perhaps, to have gone to the police-station, on the chance of obtaining aid from one of the four constables supposed to coerce into good behaviour twice as many thousand inhabitants, and eaten her heart with impatience while she waited at the locked door of an empty

office; but it never occurred to her, perhaps fortunately for the object of attack, to claim protection from the civil power; and if he was threatened by personal danger, it seemed only her *right* to be at his side.

All this, notwithstanding she had yesterday bidden him an eternal farewell, and had since told herself a hundred times that every link was broken between them, and she had done with him for ever. Her plan seemed sensible enough. She would watch at the vestry-door, from which he was sure to come out after taking off his canonicals, and implore him to shelter in his rector's house hard by, till those who had schemed to waylay him were tired of waiting. At a later hour it would be easy to get a few stout, amphibious parishioners to accompany him home. With such an escort woe to the marauder who should dare to lay a finger on "payson." These mariners of Boarshaven, with many sterling qualities, were a roughish lot. The manly courage displayed by Mervyn Strange in cases of fever or contagious disease, and, on one occasion, in an awkward street row, had won their good opinion. They loved a fight at all times, and with so excellent an excuse as the curate's quarrel this favourite pastime would be carried out with unusual spirit. Yes; he was safe enough at any hour of the night with a Boarshaven bodyguard, and—delightful reflection!—he would owe his preservation to the woman he had scorned.

A general stir, the cough that bespeaks attention, a shuffling of feet and rustling of Bibles, denoted that the prayers were ended and the sermon about to begin. Waking out of her dreams, rather ashamed that she should have allowed earthly interests so to engross her thoughts, Beltenebrosa saw Strange mount the pulpit, and wondered, with a longing heart, whether, in all that crowded congregation, he could have noticed the presence of so insignificant a unit as herself. The most pious of men are but mortal. Neither cassock nor cuirass can be made invulnerable, and there is no more immunity for the clergyman than the dragoon. Mervyn Strange knew she was in church as well as she did herself, and while her presence afforded him more happiness than he had ever hoped to experience again, he tried hard to realise the dignity of his office, the majesty of the Master before whom he stood, and to preach his best for the whole congregation—not for her alone.

So, while the deaf pew-opener took a pinch of snuff,

and the clerk settled himself into an attitude of dignified criticism, he turned up his lamps, hitched his gown on his shoulders, and gave out his text.

It was short and simple enough, though it contained in a score of words matter for a thousand homilies, and directions for every benevolent, happy, and useful life, suggesting only that love for the brother who is seen must be the best proof of love for the God who is not.

He seemed to hold none of those pessimist views so popular with many excellent divines, and neither told his congregation that this beautiful earth was a mass of festering corruption, in which good, moral and material, was wholly choked in evil, nor that the Devil, whom they defied, had the mastery, even here, over the Lord whom they worshipped and tried to serve; unworthily indeed, and unsuccessfully, but with humble, hopeful hearts, honestly doing their best. Every man, he said, had the materials for happiness at command, if he would but make judicious use of that which he found to his hand. Were not their wives, their children, their homes, their very physical wants of eating and drinking, and the comforting smoke over the fire, matters affording, on the average, infinitely more pleasure than pain? and when the good turned to evil, was it not invariably and inexcusably their own fault? If the head of the house, however lowly, were always kind, courteous, and good-tempered, would the mother scold or the little ones brawl? The man who was content with his pint that did him good, and no more, suffered neither in health nor pocket; while even if want or sickness should overcome the honest, God-fearing labourer, friends rose for him here below on every side, and something in his breast consoled him with the reflection that he had the best Friend of all, the Friend who never forgets nor forsakes —on high.

What was that something? They all had it; they all felt it. He would tell them. It was the voice of God; the still small voice; the voice that comforted them when dying; the voice that would bid them welcome home when dead.

No, their Maker did not intend they should be miserable, here or hereafter. Were there no world but this—which God forbid!—compliance with the laws He laid down for us was the only sure rule for attaining mere material comfort and happiness. Even from a selfish point of view,

every man should do good to his brother. He would put it rudely and familiarly thus: Most of his hearers were men who earned their bread and the few little luxuries they could command by daily toil, always hard, sometimes dangerous. Was there one of them who could deny he felt a certain sense of pleasure in sharing his scanty morsel of food, his shallow drop of drink, with a friend, or even his last bit of tobacco, far down Channel there, at slack-water, with a messmate? And why? What was the meaning of this? It was the God-given instinct which, when his Maker made man in His own image, He breathed into the grosser clay, so as to refine it for ever with one drop of that pure essence which gives its beauty to earth as it constitutes the very atmosphere of heaven.

Yes, if they would prosper in their doings, let them be just with all; if they would be happy in themselves, let them be more than just, let them be generous, to their neighbours. And if they would fetch the port they steered for the whole long voyage through—the wished-for fair haven—so beautiful, so peaceful, after baffling winds and sudden squalls and washing seas—let them look well to their navigation, study their course, and, above all, investigate the chart furnished expressly for their information and guidance by One who would not fail to pilot them safely into harbour at last. Let them not mistake him. This world was never meant to be all calm and sunshine. Now the barque must beat against a whole gale, anon she is gliding through summer seas on an even keel; but the same wind that baffles those clearing out fills joyously the sails of the homeward bound. The very sickness and sorrow of our brother here is turned to a blessing rather than a curse, in the manly kindness that relieves his wants, pours balm into his sores, and sets him on his way again, as the good Samaritan set the hapless wayfarer rejoicing, indeed, yet not more heartily than his benefactor, gladdened by the exercise of a charity that blesses him who gives even more than him who receives.

And so on, and so on, for less than twenty-five minutes from end to end. Then the money-box went round, returning many an auspicious thump and jangle, as coppers poured in freely from the very poorest—shillings, half-crowns, and sovereigns from the well-to-do. Many an honest, toil-worn hand gave more than it had intended. "Payson," you see, was so much in earnest, and, as his

parishioners used to observe, said neither more nor less than he meant. They knew him, too, and respected him personally. Such familiarity, when it breeds confidence rather than contempt, opens the purses of a congregation, I think, wider than the measured utterances of the Most Reverend Lord Bishop, in all the dignity of his office and his sleeves of lawn.

It is something to be assured that he who preaches does not fail to practise, and can show us the narrow way with all the more certainty that he treads its ups and downs himself.

Beltenebrosa had forgotten her purse, not purposely, I firmly believe, but in a preoccupation of mind that denoted she was thinking less of the sermon than the preacher, while she prepared for evening church. Had it not been so, she must have emptied all its store as a tribute to the eloquence which went home to her not unprejudiced heart, and, but that she had such grave matters to ponder, would have felt cruelly humiliated in presence of the portly churchwarden, who seemed to take her impecuniosity as a personal affront.

Nevertheless, the collection was a good one, and amounted to a booty well worthy of such distinguished professors as Zachary Cooper and Jericho Lee. The thought of these two ruffians acted on Beltenebrosa like spurs in the sides of a generous horse, flurrying her actions, perhaps, more than they accelerated her movements. She was out of church long before Strange left the pulpit, and, shrinking behind a buttress to avoid observation, waited for him with a beating heart at the vestry-door.

CHAPTER LIX

FALLEN AMONG THIEVES

WHY didn't he come? How slow the minutes passed! Each after each she saw the long-drawn files of the congregation emerge on their way home, some praising the sermon, some calculating its proceeds, some pondering in silence on the good seed lately sown, we may hope to bear a hundredfold. There will be no differences of rank, we are taught, in heaven; nor will it matter whether we take our last drive of all in a hearse or wheelbarrow, but we certainly *do* cling to our social distinctions as long as we can, and carry them with us even to church. There seems to be a scale of precedence both for entering and leaving the sacred edifice, regulated on a principle that the lowest should come and go first. Beltenebrosa, watching in her corner, counted out her fellow-Christians one by one: the old women who lived in the almshouses, the man with the wooden leg, the day-labourers—single, then married; the amphibious mariners, in the same order; the sweep, with a clean face; the postman, the small shopkeepers, the principal butcher, who rented a grazing-farm; the doctor, the banker, the rector leaning on his wife; last of all, sexton and clerk. Still no Mervyn Strange.

Oh! if her heart would only keep quiet! She turned sick, and her brain began to swim; but that fine organisation was not going to fail at such a crisis; and though it cost no small effort, she retained her wits sufficiently to review the situation, and ask herself, why?

The answer was simple enough: he had gone out at the other door. Could she have known what we know, she would have saved many precious moments, and spared herself much suffering. He noticed her come into church. Against its master's will, his rebellious eye rested on her form more than once during the service; and although

we will not think so meanly of his self-command as to suppose that his thoughts wandered from his duty till its conclusion, there was ample time while disrobing in the vestry to appreciate and accept the temptation of one more brief meeting, only to take her hand, ask "How did you like my sermon?" and say good-bye.

So he left his church by the door at which she came in, and where, indeed, she would naturally have gone out, scanning, as he threaded his retiring congregation, all its female figures, with an attention exceedingly foreign to the decorous habits of a clergyman, and when persisted in, by no means creditable to his reputation.

With a sinking heart he told himself he had missed her, and it served him right! What had he to do with such follies and weaknesses? A minister of the gospel, and on a Sunday night, too! It was all for the best. Why should he wish to resume that chain of which the iron had entered his soul? The links were frayed and worthless now; let them part and be done with for good and all! Yet how beautiful she looked, in the semi-obscurity of that remote pew, her pale face showing like a pearl against the dusky background, while she turned her stately little head towards him with the earnest gesture he remembered only too well. How could so queenly a bearing wear the brand of dishonour? It seemed impossible! and yet— He groaned in spirit, while he told himself that had he been a layman he would have taken her to him, shame and all; that now, though he might not so degrade his sacred office, he would ask no better than to purchase one last interview, second by second, at the price of so many drops of blood!

He walked fast in his agitation, and little guessed how she was hurrying to overtake him, eager, resolved, breathless, praying only that she might be in time.

Fleet of foot as the wild deer, no sooner was she satisfied her watch had been at the wrong door, than she started in pursuit at a pace that brought her in sight of the clergyman's tall form as it glided under a dim street-lamp to vanish in the black entrance of Crone's Alley. She redoubled her speed then. It seemed too late to save him; but the shudder with which she pictured to herself Jericho's knife rising overhead merged in a thrill of triumph at the consciousness that she could share his fate.

Never had those supple limbs borne her so fast; never had she so taxed the speed and endurance of her blood. Ere Strange was half-way down the narrow passage she had gained its mouth. Already she marked how a light at the far end showed and faded alternately with the undulations of his figure as he walked.

Suddenly the gleam disappeared, blotted out as it were and swallowed up in night. The next moment she heard a scuffle of feet, a hideous oath, and the beloved voice exclaiming in husky, choking accents—

"No, no! my friend; not while I can stand up and hit out!"

Her feet pattered like rain. In a dozen paces she was amongst them. Even in the gloom her eyes, sharpened by love and fear, took in each detail of the encounter. Mervyn Strange was yet on his legs; but dragging him backwards, clinging to his neck and shoulders as the hunting-leopard clings to its game, Zachary's short, muscular figure was paralysing the efforts of their joint victim to defend himself from Jericho Lee in front.

Though anything but powerful-looking, the clergyman's lean frame, hardened by temperate habits and strong exercise, was unusually wiry and muscular, equal to long-sustained effort, and fortified by the *condition*—there is no other word for it—that is so telling even in the briefest encounter waged hand-to-hand.

As his new ally arrived, he managed to shake himself clear of Zachary, launching at the same time a backward kick that for a few seconds incapacitated the tinker, and made him yell with pain. Jericho now found his hands full. Losing his head, perhaps, for he heard the approaching footsteps, stimulated, moreover, to spurious courage and real ferocity by drink, he whipped his long knife from its sheath with a storm of oaths, and rushed in. His arm went up to strike; but it was seized by Beltenebrosa, who clung like a wild cat.

"Blast ye!" exclaimed the gipsy, mad with rage, as he recognised his kinswoman. "You would, would you? Take it, then. You ought to have had it months ago!" And he plunged the weapon once, twice, furiously in her side.

The clergyman's hand was on the villain's throat, but his grasp relaxed as a dusky wisp of garments subsided

at his feet. Zachary, who had recovered his senses, counselled instant flight.

"Morrice, Jerry!" growled the tinker, in terse, suggestive phrase. "The rest's a-comin'! And —— it! we ain't got the swag arter all!"

The curate never heard their hurrying feet, nor thought of his own narrow escape, nor remembered he had saved his treasure for the sick. He only knew that there she lay, his Beltenebrosa—yes, his very own now—bleeding her life out on the cold wet stones in the dark.

But if the evil men do brings its own punishment, surely the good is returned to them a hundredfold. The hospital he had established at the cost of many an anxious thought, many an effort of self-abasement and self-sacrifice, did him worthy service now. In less than five minutes the motionless form of his preserver, carried thither in his own strong, loving arms, was laid in a comfortable bed expressly adapted for such emergencies, and its wounds, of which one was deep and dangerous, were being stanched by that experienced matron who, for nerve and skill, seemed no whit inferior to the surgeon—sent for on the instant—to arrive in less than a quarter of an hour.

Those only can imagine how the two watchers hung upon every breath of the sufferer who have seen the life of one human being, and the hopes of another, moored by a single thread, that may part at any moment, to let the soul drift out for ever on the dark waters of the unknown. Mervyn Strange could appreciate—none better—the reality of that future to which he looked forward himself, while he taught others to believe with him, as a solace for all human sorrow, the climax of all imaginable joy. Yet none the less did the suspense of those racking minutes, while he feared that the woman he loved might get to the Happy Land before him, plough furrows in his cheek, and sprinkle his hair with snow. In years to come, when laughing children shall twine their fingers in papa's grizzled locks, the proud and happy wife who bore them will scarce keep back her tears!

Yes; there is a time for reward as there is a time for trial. Infinite Wisdom allots each in such proportion as shall bring to perfection that noblest of all creations—the human soul. Mervyn Strange had been taught, through much tribulation, that man's love for woman, refined and spiritualised by a self-sacrifice which holds it second to

duty, is a divine ordinance, intended for the elevation and happiness of our race.

Beltenebrosa, going through the crucible of bodily pain, as she had already been proved in the furnace of mental affliction, realised the weakness of her sex and its insufficiency to stand alone. Knowing, at last, that she had found her master, she rejoiced to give him faithful service to her life's end. The wild nature was tamed; the hawk stooped to the lure: the gipsy became a meek and sincere Christian, a true, energetic, loving, and somewhat wilful wife.

But death had hovered all too near in that homely whitewashed room, and she herself hardly dared entertain a hope of recovery, resigned to the inevitable the more cheerfully that she had saved the man whose life she prized far above her own.

"My darling!" she murmured, pressing his hand to her lips, while her eyes wandered from matron to surgeon, with the blank gaze of consciousness only half regained. "My darling, *you* are safe! that is enough. That is all I asked. I can die happy, and—and"—with a wan smile—"I don't care if Jericho got clear off with the money; he can't follow me where I am going now."

"Mr. Strange, control yourself," said the surgeon. "Be pleased to leave this lady exclusively to *me*. You shall go now, but may come again to-morrow at the same hour."

Then he fairly pushed him out of the room, but followed into the passage, where he whispered something that caused the curate's spirit to go up to heaven in a transport of gratitude, while tears no man need have been ashamed of relieved the tension of heart and brain.

"My own at last!" he repeated, talking wildly to himself as he walked home with swift, unequal strides. "My very own! I know it surely now. Life for life; what would a man have more? You bought mine at a fearful price, and yet, had you but known it, I have belonged to you for years."

How soon the mind jumps to conclusions! Passing a broker's shop, he found himself calculating the expenses of furnishing, and the articles necessary to a household with a lady at its head.

Like many excellent Churchmen, he had considerably modified those ideas as to the celibacy of the clergy with which he entered on his ministry, and whereas he began by

thinking the priest should be hampered by no domestic affections, fettered by no earthly ties, he now arrived at the conclusion that a man need serve Heaven none the worse for those human interests and responsibilities which enlarge his sympathies, while they add to his experience, and that the parson is only half a parson without a wife.

CHAPTER LX

THE GAS TURNED OFF

JUSTICE is represented in allegory as lame, blindfold, and generally infirm; but we have the authority of Horace for insisting that even with a club-foot she seldom fails to overtake the *antecedentem scelestum*, the scoundrel who is making tracks to escape.

Jericho Lee, though he got off from his last outrage with better luck than he deserved, did not live to inflict further persecutions on his kinswoman, nor indeed to levy fresh contributions on the public. The failure of their joint attack caused much recrimination, and a permanent rupture between Zachary Cooper and himself. Though he swore he would hang the tinker, Nance persuaded her husband that threatened men live long, and induced him to break off all connection with the profession by leaving Boarshaven surreptitiously, and travelling westward to the very brink of the Atlantic, where, amongst a primitive population descended from the Phœnicians, bread might still be earned in the mending of kettles, the tinkering of pots and pans. Jericho, vowing he was well rid of such a muff, undertook a burglary single-handed—playing it, he said, off his own bat, and this was the result.

He carefully reconnoitred a lone farmhouse, surrounded by wastes of moorland, with no cottage or other dwelling in sight or hearing. He ascertained that the farmer kept gold and silver for his men's weekly wages in a parlour on the ground floor; that he was in the habit of staying out late of nights, particularly after market-dinners, leaving only a feeble old woman and a herd-boy to guard the place. There seemed little risk attached to such a robbery as he planned, and Jericho laughed to think how contemptible was the danger in proportion to the spoil.

So about eleven o'clock on a moonless night he stole across the moor, crept under some out-buildings, and

swinging himself on the ledge of the parlour window, proceeded to undo its fastenings from the outside with no little dexterity. He took pride in these niceties of his profession. An accomplished cracksman, he said, never blundered his work, and there was nothing so vulgar as noise!

He had lifted the sash, and was edging his body, feet foremost, into the room, when a powerful hand, laid on his collar, pulled him backwards to the ground, while a deep voice growled, with a wicked, half-triumphant chuckle, "I thowt as I should vind 'em at it! I thowt as I should! Ah! do 'ee now, if ye dare!"

The farmer, riding home from market, tolerably sober, and pacing through the bushy heather, that deadened his pony's footfall, growing, as it did, knee-high, turned the corner of his house so softly as to come upon the burglar in the act.

He was a strong, burly West-countryman, without an atom of fear in his composition, choleric withal, and one who dearly loved a tussle, either in sport or earnest. No wonder he had Jerry by the scruff of the neck and down on the heather ere a man could count ten.

The gipsy writhed in his grasp like an eel, but he was in a vice, and could not extricate himself; so he groped for his knife, and drew it, to urge the last desperate argument of crime! But he had an awkward customer to deal with—skilled in wrestling, cudgel-play, all the ruder arts of self-defence. Flinging the other off as he would have wrung an adder from his sleeve, he leaped out of distance, and with his strong hammer-headed hunting-whip, delivered "one" that broke his antagonist's arm above the wrist, causing the knife to drop harmless from his hand. Then, taking wider scope and swing, he dealt another fatal blow that fairly cracked his adversary's skull.

Ere, with the assistance of the startled inmates, he could carry Jericho into his house, the gipsy had been dead some minutes.

There was an inquest, of course, and the man-slayer gave his own version of the affair frankly enough. When asked if he had put all his strength into the *coup de grâce*, he replied, with rough simplicity, "I'd let 'un have it hard as ever I did know how! Ev I'd only a-tickled 'un, a' was bound to scratch!"

So Jericho Lee never wired a rabbit, picked a pocket,

stabbed, blasphemed, nor came from his gipsy tents again, and extracted sovereigns from his kinswoman and Lord St. Moritz no more.

That nobleman, tired of gaiety, tired of society, tired of his lady-loves, tired, perhaps, chiefly of Lord St. Moritz himself, lounged over his *Morning Post* after breakfast, read in the same column the departure of Mrs. Stripwell for Italy, and the marriage of Beltenebrosa to Mervyn Strange, that dark and handsome widow being described in the peculiar phraseology affected by newspapers as "relict of the late James Paravant, Esq., of Combe-Wester and Appleton-Cleves."

The first piece of news affected him but little. Mrs. Stripwell and he were mutually bored with each other, and although he rather suspected the journey South was undertaken with the view of letting "poor Algy" down easy, to make room for a fresh admirer, he scarce gave the matter a thought. He was more concerned about "the relict of James Paravant, Esq.," and the certainty he now felt that she had never really cared for him in her heart—that he was no more to her than so many women had been to himself—a sop for vanity, the toy of an idle hour, an additional captive to swell the triumph, another flower to make up the garland—and that was all.

What a stupid paper! Not a word of news! Five columns devoted to a debate touching the law of Hypothec in Scotland, on which, though only two understood it, every Scotch Member thought it right to have his say, reminding him of their countryman's definition of metaphysics: "When one man is explaining what he knows nothing about to another who cannot understand a word he says, that's 'metapheesics'!"

He lit a cigar. It didn't draw. Why was it impossible to get a good cigar in these days? He yawned, he stretched himself, he walked about the room, he stared through the windows at that most depressing of outlooks, an empty London street on a dull day, and found himself debarred even this melancholy consolation by the familiarity of a Savoyard with a hurdy-gurdy and a guinea-pig, who nodded and grinned at him as if they had robbed a church together the night before! There was nothing for it but to dress and go to his club.

When he got there it seemed gloomier than his own house. He had only taken his hat off once on his way,

to salute Lady Goneril, who hurried by with averted head, nor showed the slightest intention of stopping her carriage to hold discourse. He could not tell—how should he?—that her ladyship was making the best of her way home, with a swelled face, after a visit to the dentist for the stopping of her one unsound tooth! No; he thought she slighted him on purpose. She had other attractions now, younger, brighter, more notorious than himself; and this also was vanity!

A horrid suspicion shot across him! He must be growing old. Hang it, he must be *grown* old! In the morning-room of his club, two contemporaries, school-fellows at Eton, sat reading the papers. One was as grey as a badger, the other had thrown out a portly stomach, and looked a hundred. Three or four young men came in like a whirlwind, he thought, as the young men nowadays do enter and leave a room. They were all talking at once, discussing some engrossing subject on which, to do them justice, they felt more sympathy than they showed. What was it?

"Had he not heard? Poor Beauregard died this morning. Six hours' illness. Three doctors called in—enough to kill any fellow! Poor Beau!" was their verdict. "What a good dinner he gave you! What good claret he had! What a good sportsman he was! After all, he was about due. He had a good long lease, and lived to a good old age!"

St. Moritz started, crossed the room, and looked in the *Peerage*. Yes, he thought so. Beauregard was exactly a month younger than himself. He had no heart to join in the conversation, but remained in his corner with the book open before him.

He gazed blankly round at the well-known chairs and tables, the clock that was never wrong, the familiar-looking glass that had reflected St. Moritz when he seldom required to shave. How long had he been a member of this very club? and what had he done with all the best years of a lifetime, no less irrecoverably gone, with their pleasures and their follies, than the bubbles we watch dancing down to destruction on a running stream? Like Byron's representative nobleman, he had "lived his life and gamed his gaming," the latter honestly enough; but as regarded the rest of the programme, had danced and voted but little, he thought, and shone not at all. Must he too

remain "to be bored or bore"? The prospect was dreary in the extreme, and yet it seemed to close round him, narrowing every moment, thick and dull, like mist on an open moor.

Rousing himself from his abstraction, he looked about him as though waking out of a dream. The room was cleared. His two old cronies had departed, one to meet a soldier son from India, the other to take his grandchildren to the play. The young men had gone out as they came in, laughing, talking, and leaving the door open behind them. Lord St. Moritz was as much alone in this empty club as Robinson Crusoe in his island. Was he not also as much alone in the world? That world to which he had given his life, his energies, his affections, to find, now the gas had been turned off, it was but a theatre by daylight, after all. Glare, tinsel, and decorations had faded with the extinguished lamps. The hangings were but rags, the scenes tawdry; there was no background, the house was empty, and the stage was bare.

He went little to church, he read his Bible scarcely at all; yet the words of the Preacher came as forcibly to his mind as if they had been addressed to himself alone:

"Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit!"

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